

JAI CO BOOK



INDIA'S OWN POCKET EC.

In that land, however, where all depends on rain and rice, life can become relentlessly hard : fate has not yet finished with Rukmani and her children. But the family's loyalty and spirit is never broken, and still finds its own rewards.

long been notorious, is driven to more dangerous devices. The tannery eats up land and the landlords have to exact harsher terms. But still there is love, and Rukmani's children grow up clever and strong

The coming of the tannery seems to bring bad

In the years of good harvests life goes easily : rice is plentiful and there is money to buy vegetable seed. Sometimes there is even milk for the children. Through all the seasons, the generous and gentle Rukmani is content in her love and admiration for her husband Nathan and their playful children. Life in their little South Indian village has no luxuries to offer, but they have never known them and do not understand people who need them—like the jewelled wives who arrive with the officials in the new tannery.

NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Kamala Markandaya



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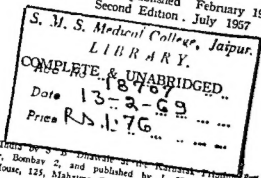
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NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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*Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And hope without an object cannot live.*

—COLERIDGE

husband and I. How well I remember the day, sudden sickness that overcame me when the moment of parture came! My mother in the doorway, no tears, but her face bloated with their weight. My father a little in front of her, waiting to see us safely away. My husband, seated already on the bullock with the tin trunk full of cooking vessels and my next to him. Somehow I found myself also sitting apart, in finery, with downcast eyes. Then the cart move, lurching as the bullocks got awkwardly into and I was sick. Such a disgrace for me. 'How ever live it down?' I remember thinking. 'I shall regret.' I haven't forgotten, but the memory is not my husband soothed and calmed me.

"It is a thing that might happen to anybody," he said. It fret. Come, dry your eyes and sit up here beside so I did, and after a while I felt better, the tears eyes and dried on my lashes.

Six hours we rode on and on along the dusty road, several villages on the way to ours, which was a distance away. Half way there we stopped and meal: boiled rice, dhal, vegetables and curds. A coconut apiece too, in which my husband nicked with his scythe for me so that I might drink the milk. Then he unyoked the bullocks and led them to a small pool of water near which we had stopped, gave them each a handful of hay. Poor beasts, they were glad of the water, for already their hides were dusty and stened with sweat in the sunlight.

After a half-hour before resuming our journey. The men, refreshed, began stepping jauntily again, tossing beads and jangling the bells that hung from their pointed horns. The air was full of the sound of the song of birds, sparrows and bulbuls mainly, and sometimes the cry of an eagle, but when we passed a green and leafy, I could hear minahs and very warm, and, unused to so long a

Sometimes now I can see quite clearly — the veil is rent and for a few seconds I see blue skies and tender trees, when it closes on me again and once more I am back in a world of my own, which darkens a little with each passing day. Yet not alone, for the faces of those I have loved, things that have been — shapes, forms, images — are always before me; and sometimes they are so vivid that truly I cannot say whether I see them or not, whether the veil is lifted to allow me the sight, or whether it is only my mind that sees. Today, for instance, I could see the brook that ran near our paddy field so clearly that I felt I had but to stoop to feel its water wet on my hands. Yet that brook belongs to a part of my life that is finished. I was a bride for only a week when I first followed it to look for a suitable place for my washing. I walked for nearly an hour before I found a wide stretch of water and a sandy beach, with boulders scattered about. I put my bundle down, untied it, and put the clothes in. The water was clear but not swift running — the linen did not float too far or too quickly away from my hands. I tucked my sari up above my knees and stood in the river, scrubbing the clothes against a large flat stone and using just a little of the washing powder my mother had given me, good stuff, with a clean sweet smell and much power in it. When I had finished, I carried the clothes beyond the beach and laid them on the grassy bank to dry in the sun.

Just then I saw Kali, wife of our neighbour, coming towards me, and with her were two women I had not seen before. All carried bundles of washing on their heads, and two had children at their hips and the third was expecting. They called out when they saw me, and I came down, a little shy, since they seemed to know each other so well; but before long I came to know them well too, these three women who lived nearest to us, and whose lives were so closely woven with mine. Kali, big and plump with ample hips and thrusting breasts, whose house was in the next field to ours; Janaki, married to the shopkeeper, with her homely face and sagging

He considered. "You are not a child any more," he said at last. "You have grown fast since the day we were married, and that not so long ago"

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work, getting up at sunrise and going to sleep content. Peace and quiet were ours. How well I recall it, how grateful I am that not all the clamour which invaded our lives later could subdue the memory or still the longing for it. Rather, it has strengthened it. Had there not been what has been, I might never have known how blessed we were. True, my husband did not own the land he tilled, as my father had done; yet the possibility was there that he might one day do so. We owned our own ploughing bullocks, we kept a milch goat. From each harvest we saved, and had gunny-sacks full of the husked rice stored away in our small stone-lined granary. There was food in plenty for two people and we ate well: rice for morning and evening meals, dhal; sometimes a coconut grated fine and cooked in milk and sugar, sometimes a wheatcake, fried in butter and melting in the mouth.

Once or twice a week I would go to the village to buy sugar, ghee and vegetables, calling on the way home at Durgan the milkman's to get curds, for our goat was running dry and there was not always enough milk to make my own. I liked going to the village and meeting its people, for they were a friendly lot and most of them anxious to help if they could. I got to know them all very quickly: Old Granny, who lived on what she made by selling peanuts and guavas; Hanuman, the general merchant; Perumal, husband of Janaki, who kept the only shop, and Biswas, the money-lender. Sometimes Janaki or Kali would come to see how I was getting on, but not often, for they were kept busy looking after husband and children. As for Kunthi, very

soon she was unable to do anything for herself, for was a thin, slight girl, and we had to go in turns to her provisions and to help her with the work in the house. Kunthi was different from the other women, quieter, more reserved, and for all that we tried to be at ease with there was a barrier which we could not surmount. Especially high against me it stood, strange and forbidding, though why this should be I could not think, finally I it down to my imagination.

She had, everybody said, married beneath her. Perhaps they said that of me too, but I was plain and she was pretty so it didn't make sense in her case. For myself, I am glad I married 'beneath me,' for a finer man no one could have had; but possibly she was not so lucky.

A man is indeed fortunate if he does not marry above, for if he does he gets a wife who is no help to him, soever, only an ornament. I know, for I was ignorant of the simplest things, and no ornament either. Kunthi and Janaki between them had to show me how to milk the goat, how to plant seed, how to churn butter from milk, and how to hull rice. What patience indeed my husband must have had, to put up with me uncomplaining during those early days of our married lives! Not a cross word or impatient look, and praise for whatever small success I achieved. I had planted, in the flat patch of ground behind the hut, a few pumpkin seeds. The soil here was rich, never having yielded before, and loose so that it did not require much digging. The seeds sprouted quickly, sending up delicate green shoots that I kept carefully watered, going several times to the well nearby for the purpose. Soon they were not delicate but sprang up vigorously over the earth, and pumpkins began to form, which, fattening on soil and sun and water, swelled daily larger and larger and ripened to yellow and red, until at last they were ready to eat, and I cut one and took it in. When Nathan saw it he was full of admiration, and made much of this one fruit—he who was used to harvesting in the field at a time.

"One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before," I said, though pleased with him and myself, keeping my eyes down.

"Not from our land," said Nathan. "Therefore it is precious, and you, Ruku, are indeed a clever woman."

I tried not to show my pride. I tried to be off-hand and put the pumpkin away. But pleasure was making my pulse beat, the blood, unbidden, came hot and surging to my face.

After that, ten times more zealous, I planted beans and sweet potatoes, brinjals and chulies, and they all grew well under my hand, so that we ate even better than we had one before.

CHAPTER II

KUNTHI'S child was born a few months before mine, a fine boy who nearly took his mother's life in or his own. Janaki was ill and could not come, was away, therefore I had to do what I could. "My husband went off to fetch the midwife, leaving me, the sweating girl. When she saw who I was — not at all, or she was half-dazed with pain — Kunthu cried out that he did not want me.

"You must go," she kept entreating

"Why," I said. "Do you dislike me so much, then?"

No, no, but please go. I do not want you here."

"I cannot and will not. Besides there is no one else."

"I shall be all right. The midwife will be here soon."

"And what will your husband say," I said, "if I leave you here alone?" and I took no more notice of her cries.

When she saw I would not go, she grew still and lay like a log, not a murmur from her, but the sweat forcing itself up in oily drops on her throat and temples.

Kunthu was lying in an exhausted sleep, with her baby beside her, before I went home. It was a whole day since I had left. Nathan was waiting for me and he said crossly:

"You look like a corpse. Whatever possessed you to stay so long?"

"Blame the midwife," I said. "She could not be found, or blame Kunthu's son. He took a long time."

I was tired and my voice was on edge.

"Well, so long as you don't forget you are pregnant," he said shortly and turned away. It was the first time I had seen him angry. Tears came pricking at my eyeballs. I sat down to stop my head from spinning, and after a while the pain went. 'He means well,' I thought. 'He is so anxious only about our child. Better that he should worry than that he should not.'

From then 'on, I began to take more care of myself, giving more and more of the work to Nathan. Sowing was at hand and there was plenty to be done in the fields - dams of clay to be built to ensure proper irrigation of the paddy terraces; the previous year's stubble to be lifted; rushes and weeds to be destroyed; then the transplanting. All this meant stooping, and Nathan would not hear of it.

With the leisure I now had I took up writing again. It was my father who taught me to read and write. People said he did it because he wanted his children to be one above the rest, perhaps so, but I am certain that he also knew that it would be a solace to me in affliction, a refuge amid tranquillity. So he taught his six children, myself the youngest by ten years, with the patience he brought to all things. 'Practise hard,' he would say, watching me busy with slate and pencil. 'For who knows what dowry there will be for you when you are ready!' And I, with the thistledown of childish care upon me, would listen intently and take up my pencil again.

'What use,' my mother said, 'that a girl should be learned! Much good will it do her when she has lusty sons and a husband to look after. Look at me, am I any worse that I cannot spell my name, so long as I know it? Is not my house clean and sweet, are not my children well fed and cared for?' My father laughed and said 'Indeed they are,' and did not pursue the matter; nor did he give up his teaching.

'When my child is ready,' I thought now, 'I will teach him too'; and I practised harder than ever lest my fingers should lose their skill. When Janaka, recovered from her sickness, came to see me, she marvelled that I could write; but Kali, who had come too, was scornful of the strange symbols which had no meaning for her and dismissed me as a foible of pregnancy.

'You will forget all about such nonsense when your child is born,' she said. "Besides, there will be

my eager gaze, my excitement would rise and mount; zed, wondrous.

"You will get used to it," Nathan said. "After many ings and harvestings you will not notice these things." re have been many sowings and harvestings, but the nder has not departed

was tying the bean tendrils to the wire fence I had it when I saw a quiver in the leaves of the pumpkins. e fruit is ripening, I thought, the birds are already here perhaps mice. Leaving the beans I went to look, stooping part the leaves with my hand

"Why did not the snake strike at once?"

Was the cobra surprised into stillness that a human ould dare to touch it? My hands recoiled from the dness of serpent flesh, my nails clawed at my palms, leaves I had parted moved back to cover it. For a ment my legs remained stiffly planted beside the pump- is, then the blood came racing to my limbs again, and an from the spot screeching with fear and not looking ind me.

Nathan came rushing to me, almost knocking me over, ight and shook me

"What is it, what is it?" he shouted roughly.

"A snake," I whispered, bereft of voice and breath. "A bra I touched it."

He looked at me as if I were mad.

"Go in and stay there," he said. I wanted only to fall his feet in my terror, to beg him not to leave me alone, it he was staring at me unrelenting. At last I went, wed, but with the waters of panic receding

"The snake had not stirred" Nathan said as he came ck. He had cut it to pieces with his scythe and buried e remains so that I should not be upset

"Yet you have lived long enough to learn to disregard em," he said. "Are they not found everywhere—tree lakes, water snakes and land snakes? You only need be careful and they pass you by."

"True," I said, shamefaced yet rallying. "But

e baby had awakened and was crying loudly, so that I had to yell. I was so pleased to see her whole, I could speak for relief. At last I told her, shakily, about the cobra, and, rather ashamed by now of making such a fuss, exaggerated a little, making the snake enormous of its size, and the danger more deadly than it had been.

Women can sometimes be more soothing than men : so with Kali. "Poor thing," she said. "No wonder you are frightened. Anyone would be. But it is a pity your husband killed the snake, since cobras are sacred."

"She is a fool," Nathan said contemptuously when I told him. "What would she have me do — worship it while it dug its fangs in my wife? Go now — forget it."

I think I did, although once or twice when I saw the thickness of the pumpkin vines I wondered nervously what might lie concealed there ; and then I would take up knife and shovel to clear away the tangle ; but when I drew near I saw the broad glossy leaves and curling green tendrils could not bring myself to do it ; and now I am glad I did not, for that same vine yielded to me richly, pumpkin after pumpkin of a size and colour that I never saw elsewhere.

We called our daughter Irawaddy, after one of the great rivers of Asia, for of all things water was most precious to us ; but it was too long a name for the tiny little thing she was, and soon she became Ira. Nathan at first paid scant attention to her : he had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a puling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind ; but soon she stopped being a puling infant, and when at the age of ten months she called him *Apa*, which means father, he began to take a lively interest in her.

She was a fair child, lovely and dimpled with soft, gleaming hair. I do not know where she got her looks : not from me, nor from Nathan, but there it was, and not only so, but other people noticed and remarked on it. I did not know how I could have produced so

child, and I was proud of her and glad, even when I pretended to disbelieve that I could be her mother. "It is a marvel indeed," they would say, and make much of her with ordinary parents who sometimes bore a child of much less brilliance, or with a devout couple who had bred forth a wretch. I preferred to think the plain have their rewards, and this was mine.

"She is like you," Nathan would say to me as he conveyed her, but he was the only one who thought so.

Before long she was crawling all over the place, following her father into the fields, trailing me as I went about my work, and very soon she began to walk.

"You must not allow it so early," Kali said to me seriously, "or her legs will bend like hoops." And at first I listened to her and whenever I saw Ira trying to get up or walk, I would rush forward and pick her up. But soon there was no stopping her. I should have been at it the whole time otherwise, and I had other things to do. Sowing time was at hand, and I was out all day long, Nathan planting the paddy in the drained fields. Ira had to be sown too, the land was ready. My husband ploughed it, steadying the plough behind the two bullocks while I came behind, strewing the seed to either side and sprinkling the earth over from the basket at my hip.

When that was done, it was time for our hut to be checked. It had stood up well to sun and wind, but the monsoon rains several small patches showed wear. It was as well to get things done in good time. We cut fronds from the coconut palm that grew by our door and dried them for me, together we twisted the fibre and bound the palms, shaping them to the roof and strengthening the whole with clay.

Ira was no trouble at all. She would sit happily playing by herself in the sun, chuckling at the birds or at anything else she could see, including her fond parents; or if it was hot and she grew fretful I would hang a cloth over a branch and put her in it, and she would go to sleep without any further bother. My mother, especially, grew

I of her and came to see us often, although it meant travelling several hours in a bullock cart, which is very tiring when one is no longer young. Sometimes I would go to see my parents, but seldom, since there was so much to be done in my own home ; and my mother, knowing this, would not reproach me for the long intervals between my visits.

CHAPTER III

‘Do not worry,’ they said. ‘You will be putting it in your face.’ They still say it, but the lines are already there and they are silent about *that*. Kafi said and I knew she was thinking of her own brood. Kafi said it, and in her eyes lay the knowledge of her children. Janaki said, morosely, she wished it could to her : a child each year was no fun. Only Nathan not say it to me, for he was worried too, and knew better. We did not talk about it, it was always with us : a fear that Ira was to be our only child.

My mother, whenever I paid her a visit, would me accompany her to a temple, and together we would pray and pray before the deity, imploring for help we were giddy. But the Gods have other things to they cannot attend to the pleas of every suppliant dares to raise his cares to heaven. And so the years passed by and still we had only one child, and that a daughter.

When Ira was nearing six, my mother was afflicted with consumption, and was soon so feeble that she could not rise from her bed. Yet in the midst of her pain she still thought of me, and one day she beckoned me near and placed in my hand a small stone lingam, symbol of fertility.

“Wear it,” she said. “You will yet bear many children. I see them, and what the dying seer will come to pass be assured, this is no illusion.”

“Rest easy,” I said. “You will recover.”

She did not—no one expected she would—but she lingered for a long time. In her last months my father sent for the new doctor who had settled in the village. Nobody knew where he came from or who paid him, but there he was, and people spoke well of him, though he was a foreigner. As for my father, he would have called the Devil himself to spare my mother any suffering.

was in a house of sorrow that I first met Kennington, a man people called Kenny. He was tall and gaunt, with pale skin and sunken eyes the colour of a kingfisher's wing, neither blue nor green. I had never seen a white man so close before, and so I looked my fill.

"When you have done with staring," he said coldly, "perhaps you will take me to your mother."

I started, for I had not realised I was goggling at him. I was startled, too, that he should have spoken in our tongue.

"I will show you," I said, stumbling in my confusion.

My mother knew no man could save her and she did not expect miracles. Between her and this man, young though he was, lay mutual understanding and respect, one for the other. He told her no lies, and she trusted him. He came often, sometimes even when he was not summoned; and his presence, as much as the powders and pills he made her take, gave my mother her ease. When she died it was in the same way, without a struggle, so that although we loved for her our hearts were not torn by her suffering.

Before I left for my village, I told him that for what he had done there could be no repayment. "Remember my father," I said, "that my home is yours, and all in it."

He thanked me gravely, and as I turned to go he raised his hand to stop me.

"There is a look about you," he said. "It lies in your eyes and the mark is on your face. What is it?"

"Would you not grieve too," I said, "if the woman who gave you birth was no more than a handful of dust?"

"It is not that alone. The hurt is of longer standing. Why do you lie?"

I looked up and his eyes were on me. 'Surely,' I thought, 'my mother has told him, for he knows'; but as if he guessed my thoughts he shook his head. "No, I do not know. Tell me."

I held back. He was a foreigner, and although I no longer stood in awe of him, still the secret has been long locked up in my breast and would not come out easily.

As for Nathan, nothing would do but that the whole
 lage should know—as if they didn't already. On the
 th day from the birth he invited everybody to feast and
 oice with us in our good fortune. Kali and Janaki both
 ne to help me prepare the food, and even Kunthi's reserve
 umbled a little as she held up my son to show him to our
 titors. Between us we prepared mounds of rice, tinting
 with saffron and frying it in butter, made hot curries
 dishes of jaggery
 er the fire, filled
 it plantain leaves
 is ready we spread
 leaves under the gaudy marriage pandal Nathan had
 rrowed for the occasion and ate and drank for long,
 try hours. Afterwards Kunthi was persuaded to play
 us on her bulbul tara, which she did skilfully, plucking
 the strings with her slender fingers and singing in a low,
 ar voice which people strained to hear, so that it was very
 let.

The baby, who had slept through all the clamour, woke
 now in the sudden hush and began squalling. Kunthi
 pped her thrumming. People crowded round me, trying
 pat the baby who had caused all this excitement—al-
 though he was no beauty, with puckered face and mouth
 ened wide to emit shriek after shriek.

"Such a furor," Kali said. "One would think the child
 d wings, at the very least."

"Seven years we have waited," said Nathan, his eyes
 nting, "wings or no wings."

The one person I had wanted most to see at our feast
 is not there. I had gone to seek him, but he was not
 be found. 'He goes and comes,' they told me. 'Nobody
 ows where or why.' So I had to be content without him;
 contentment cannot be forced, and Nathan noticed my
 occupation

"What now?" he said. "Are you not happy? Would
 I have the moon too, as Kali would have wings?"

"Indeed no," I said, "it is just that I would have to see Kenny under our roof. He did so much for mother." 'And for us,' I thought, but could not say for at the beginning I had not wished my husband to that I was putting myself in the hands of a foreigner, I knew not what his reaction would be. I had convinced myself that it would be time enough to tell him if a child was born; and now I found I could not do it, because he would surely ask why I had not told him before. ... 'No harm,' I thought, 'if he does not know; I have not told him, there has just been this silence.'

In our sort of family it is as well to be the first to what resources there are, have later to be shared out in smaller and smaller portions. Ira had been fed well on milk and butter and rice; Arjun too, for he was the first boy. But for those who came after, there was less and less. Four more sons I bore in as many years — Thirumuran, Raja and Selvam. It was as if all the past desires of my childless days were now bearing fruit. I was very fortunate for they were, without exception, healthy; and in their infancy and childhood my daughter looked after them almost as much as I did. She was a great one for babies, handling them better than many a grown woman while she was still a child.

How quickly children grow! They are infants — look away a minute and in that time they have left their babyhood behind. Our little girl ran about, in the sun, as bare and beautiful as she grew, with no clothes to hamper her limbs or confine her movements. Then one day when she was five — long before Arjun was born — Nathan pointed her out to me as she played in the fields.

"Cover her," he said. "It is time."

I wanted to cry out that she was a baby still, but of course Nathan was right; she had left infancy for ever. And so I made a skirt for her, weaving bright colours in the white cotton that she might like it, and so she did for a time, wearing it gladly, twirling it about her as she ran round and round; but when the novelty had worn off,

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

SOMETIMES at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together. Then morning comes, the wavering grey turns to gold, there is a stirring within as the sleepers wake, and he softly departs.

One by one they come out into the early morning sunshine, my son, my daughter: Puli, the child I clung to who was not mine, and he no longer a child. Puli is with me because I tempted him, out of my desperation I lured him away from his soil to mine. Yet I have no fears now; what is done is done, there can be no repining. 'Are you happy with me?' I said to him yesterday — being sure of the answer. He nodded, not hesitating, but a little impatient. An old woman's foibles. A need for comfort.

But I am comforted most when I look at his hands. He has no fingers, only stubs, since what has been taken can never be given back, but they are clean and sound. Where the sores were, there is now pink puckered flesh, his limbs are untouched. Kenny and Selvam between them have kept my promise to him.

In the distance when it is a fine day and my sight is not too dim, I can see the building where my son works. He and Kenny, the young and the old. A large building, spruce and white; not only money has built it but men's hopes and pity, as I know who have seen it grow brick by brick and year by year.

taking jewels and dowry with her; but when it Thangam, only relations from our own village came wedding and not from the surrounding districts as had done before, and the only jewel she had was a diamond nose-screw.

'What for you,' my mother would say, taking my hand in her hands, 'my last-born, my baby? Four dowries too much for a man to bear.' 'I shall have a grand wedding,' I would say. 'Such that everybody will remember when all else is a dream forgotten' (I had heard this phrase in a storyteller's tale). 'For is not my father head of the village?' I knew this pleased my mother, for she would at once laugh, and lose her look of worry. Once when I repeated this, my eldest brother overheard me, and said sharply, 'Don't speak like a fool, the headman is no longer of consequence. There is the Collector, who comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, not to those he appoints, not to the headman.'

This was the first time I had ever heard that my father was of no consequence. It was as if a prop on which I had leaned had been roughly kicked away, and I felt frightened and refused to believe him. But of course he was right, and by the time I came to womanhood even I had acknowledged that his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and so they married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care for me, his wife, whom he took when I was of the age of twelve. Our relatives, I know, murmured that the match was below me; my mother herself was not happy, but I was without beauty and without dowry and it was the best she could do. 'A poor match,' they said, and not always quietly. How little they knew, any of them.

A woman, they say, always remembers her wedding night. Well, may be they do; but for me there are other nights I prefer to remember, sweeter, fuller, when I went to my husband matured in mind as well as in body, not as a pained and awkward child as I did on that first night. And when the religious ceremonies had been completed, we

ne fractious and wanted to tear it from her. It was
y a month before she resigned herself to it.

th six children to feed we could no longer afford to
all the vegetables we grew. Once a week I would
and pack our garden produce, selecting the best and
ng the spoilt or bruised vegetables for ourselves, cover
basket with leaves and set off for the village. Old
my was always glad to buy from me, and at first I
d make straight for the corner of the street where she
with her gunny-sack spread before her. The old lady
ld pick out the purple brinjals and yellow pumpkins,
shiny green and red chillies, feeling them with her
ikled fingers and complimenting me on their size.
None like yours," she would say. "Such colour, such
loom on them!" Perhaps she said it to everyone who
e to her, but I would feel absurdly pleased and go
y with my insides smiling. Then one day Biswas, the
ey-lender, stopped me in the street. I would have
ied after a brief salutation, for among us there is a dis-
of the money-lending class, but he stood squarely in
path.

Ah, Rukmani," he said, "in a hurry as usual, I see."
My children are not of an age to be left alone for long."
I, speaking civilly

"Yet surely you have time for a little business with
?"

"If you will tell me what business?"

"Buying and selling," he said, cackling, "which is your
iness, as lending is mine."

"If you will make yourself clear," I said, "I will stay
I hear; otherwise I must be on my way."

"Those vegetables," he said, "that Old Granny buys from
1. What price does she pay you?"

"A fair price," I said, "and no haggling."

"I will pay you four annas a dozen for brinjals, and
: annas each for pumpkins, if they are large." He was
ering almost double what Old Granny paid.

I went away. The following week I sold almost

whole basket to him, keeping only a little for Old Gr. I did not like selling to him, although he paid me a good price. It was business and nothing else with him, a word of chaff or a smile—or perhaps it was the last I missed—and I would much rather have had it that way, but there you are, you cannot choose.

To my surprise Old Granny made no comment, but smiling reassuringly when I muttered guiltily that our at home were growing. In the beginning she may not have known, but when I sold her, week after week, one pumpkin or half a dozen brinjals she must have known the truth. But she said nothing, nor did I, for we knew she could not pay me more, and I could not sell for less. As it was, we were going short of things. We no longer had milk in the house, except the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our except on rare occasions. But we never went hungry, some of the families were doing. We grew our own tains and coconuts, the harvests were good and there was always food in the house—at least a bagful of a little dhal, if no more. Then when the rice terraces drained, there was the fish, spawned among the paddy, what we could not eat, we dried and salted away. every month I put away a rupee or two against the day Ira would be married. So we still could not grumble.

CHAPTER IV

CHANGE I had known before, and it had been gradual. My father had been headman once, a person of consequence in our village : I had lived to see him relinquish its importance, but the alteration was so slow that we hardly knew when it came. I had seen both my parents sink into old age and death, and here too there was no change. But the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye.

Arjun came running to us with the news. He had run the way from the village and we had to wait while he panted in fresh air. "Hundreds of men," he gasped. "They are pulling down houses across the river and there is a

eyes popping
ing back," he

was measuring
new tannery

they are building," he said. "I had heard rumours."

Arjun, torn between a desire to dash back and a craving to hear more from his father, teetered anxiously to and fro on his heels ; but Nathan said no more. He put the grain away carefully in the granary, then he rose. "Come," he said. "We will see."

All the families were out : the news had spread quickly. Kali and her husband, Kunthi and her boys, Janaki, surrounded by her numerous family, even Old Granny, had come out to see. Children were everywhere, dodging in and out of the crowd and crying out to each other in shrill excited voices. Startled pi-dogs added to the din. We formed a circle about the first arrivals, some fifty men or

so, who were unloading bricks from the bullock-carts spoke in our language, but with an intonation which it difficult for us to understand them.

"Townpeople," Kali whispered to me. "They say have travelled more than a hundred miles to get here. She was prone to exaggerate, and also believed what was told her.

In charge of the men was an overseer who looked spoke like the men, but who was dressed in a shirt trousers, and he had a hat on his head such as I had seen Kenny wear before: a topee the colour of the The others wore loin-cloths and turbans and a few shirts; but as the day wore on they doffed their shirt by one, until all were as our men.

The men worked well and quickly, with many a long glance at us, they seemed to enjoy having such a stir and lured such a big audience. As for overseer, he made much play of his authority, directed them with loud voice and many gestures but doing a stroke of work himself. Still, it must have been him standing there waving his arms about, for the he wore was sticking to his back and now and then would lift his hat as if to allow the wind to cool his.

Until at last there was a commotion about the of the circle of which we were the inner ring. The was parting, and as the movement spread to us we way too, to let a tall white man through. He had white topee, and was accompanied by three or four dressed like him in shorts. The overseer now came ward, bowing and scraping, and the red-faced one ran to him rapidly but so low that we could not hear what was saying. The overseer listened respectfully and then began telling us to go, not to disturb the men, although for so long he had been glad of many watchers. In the maidan, in our village he stood, telling us to go.

"As if he owned us," muttered Kannan the chakkar. think that already he foresaw his livelihood being from him, for he salted and tanned his own skins, making

into chaplins for those in the village who wore them. He stood his ground, glaring at the overseer and refusing to move, as did a few others who resented the haughty airs that poured from the man's lips; but most of us, having our own concerns to mind. Every day for two months the line of bullock-carts came laden with bricks and stones and cement, sheets of tin and corrugated iron, coils of rope and hemp. The kilns in the neighbouring villages were kept busy firing the bricks, but their output was insufficient, and the carts had to go further afield, returning dusty and brick-filled. Day and night women twisted rope, since they could sell as much as they made, and traders waxed prosperous selling their wares to the workmen. They were very well paid, these men, some of them earning two rupees in a single day, whereas even in good times we seldom earned as much, and they spent lavishly: rice and vegetables and dhal, sweetmeats and fruit. Around the maidan they built their huts, for there was no other place for them, and into these brought

just a load of tin sheeting to the roof. Then one day the building was completed. The workers departed, taking with them their goods and chattels, leaving only the empty huts behind. There was a silence, the unwonted quiet we all wondered apprehensively what would happen next. A week went by and another. Losing our awe we entered the building, poking into its holes and corners, looking into the great vats and drums that had been installed, then, curiosity slaked, we set about our old tasks on the land and in our homes. There were some among the traders—those who had inflated their prices and made their money—who regretted their going. Not I. They had invaded our village with their chatter and din, had taken from us the maidan, here

children played, and had made the bazaar prices too for us. I was not sorry to see them go.

"They will be back," said Nathan my husband, "others will take their place. And did you not benefit by their stay, selling your pumpkins and plantains for better prices than you did before?"

"Yes," said I for I had, "but what could I buy with the money with prices so high everywhere? No sugar, dhool or ghee have we tasted since they came, and we have had none so long as they remained."

"Nevertheless," said Nathan, "they will be back; you may be sure they did not take so much trouble to leave a shell in our midst. Therefore it is as well to accept these things."

"Never, never," I cried. "They may live in our town, but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands on us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and by our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is in the hope that one day things will be as they were we have done these things. Now that they have gone, let us forget them and return to our ways."

"Foolish woman," Nathan said. "There is no going. Bend like the grass that you do not break."

Our children had not seen us so serious, so before. Three of my sons huddled together in a corner at us with wide eyes, the two youngest lay asleep, on Ira's arms, the other leaning heavily against her; and herself sagged against the wall with their weight as she there on the floor. There was a look on her lovely face that pierced me.

"Ah well," I said, dissembling, "perhaps I exaggerate. If they return we shall have a fine dowry for our daughter, and that is indeed a good thing."

The lost look went from Ira's face. She was still, despite the ripeness of her thirteen years, and no longer fancied a grand wedding even as I had done.

They came back. Not the same men who

pers, and not all at once but slowly. The red-faced
 ite man came back with a foreman, and took charge
 everything. He did not live in the village but came
 I went, whilst his men took over the huts that had lain
 pty, the ones who came last settling beside the river,
 inging their wives and children with them, or dotting
 : maidan even more thickly with the huts they built
 • themselves and their families

I went back to my home, thankful that a fair distance
 ll lay between them and us, that although the smell
 their brews and liquors hung permanently in the sickened
 , still their noise came to us from afar.

"You are a queer being," Kunthi said, her brows flaring
 ray from her eyes. "Are you not glad that our village
 no longer a clump of huts but a small town? Soon
 ere will be shops and tea-stalls, and even a bioscope, such
 I have been to before I was married. You will see."

"No doubt I will," I said. "It will not gladden me
 ready my children hold their noses when they go by,
 id all is shouting and disturbance and crowds wherever
 ou go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else
 eir calls are lost to us."

"You are a village girl," said Kunthi, and there were
 adows of contempt moving behind her eyes. "You do
 ot understand."

If I was a village girl, Kali and Janaki were too, and
 ad no taste for the intruders; but after awhile Janaki
 onfessed that at least she now knew what to do with
 er sons, for the land could not take them all; and as
 or Kali, well, she had always been fond of an audience
 or her stories. So they were reconciled and threw the
 ast away with both hands that they might be the readier
 n pain, envying such

CHAPTER V

IN all the years of our tenancy we never saw the Zemindar who owned our land. Sivaji acted for him, and being kindly, humane man we counted ourselves lucky. Unlike some, he did not extract payment in kind to the last grain; he allowed us to keep the gleanings, he did not demand from us bribes of food or money, nor did he claim for himself the dung from the fields which he might easily have done, stipulating only that Kali and I should gather our share on different days to avoid arguments. Thus way we got fairly equal quantities and there was no bad blood between us.

One morning, so early that the dew still jewelled the grass and the clamour of the tannery had not yet begun, I went out on my errand. It was as well to go out early, otherwise you could never tell how much had already been taken by urchins, for dung was easy to sell and commanded a good price. Several times before, I had seen boys on the road and had chased them from it, but without succeeding in getting hold of their loot.

That morning there were a lot of pickings, I soon filled the small basket I had with me. As I bent down for the last handful I became aware that someone was watching me. It was Kenny, thinner than when I had last seen him, but how could I ever forget him? Leaving my basket, I ran to him, dirty hands and all, with a glad welcoming heart.

"My lord, my benefactor," I cried. "Many a time I have longed to see you. Now at last you come," and I bent down to kiss his feet, shod as they were in leather shoes. He withdrew them quickly and told me to get up.

"I am not a benefactor," he said, "nor a lord. What ails you?"

"You *are* my benefactor," I said stoutly. "Have I not five sons to prove it?"

"Am I to blame for your excesses," said he, but his eyes were alight with laughter, no doubt at my fallen face.

"Come with me," I said, recovering myself. "You see them, excesses or not."

"For a few minutes only, I am busy," he replied, as I picked up my basket he peered in. "I see you dung and take it with you. Is it not for the land?"

"Indeed no. Dung is too useful in our homes given to the land, for it is fuel to us and protection against damp and heat and even ants and mice. Did you not know?"

"Too well," he answered shortly. "I have seen women for ever making dung-cakes and burning them smearing their huts. Yet I thought you would know I who live by the land yet think of taking from it without giving."

"What substitute then?" I said quietly.

He made no reply but came after me. All the children were awake, waiting for their morning meal of rice-veal. Nathan was working in the fields, and I sent one of the boys to call him in. For Kenny I spread a mat and he sat down while we grouped ourselves about him, but I could see he was not accustomed to sitting cross-legged on the floor, for his knees instead of resting on the mat sprang up aslant like the horns of a bull, and I was uncomfortable for him, and distressed that I had nothing else to offer.

Ira strained the rice-water into wooden bowls for the children, the rice itself we kept for our midday meal—but to the bowl she added a handful of the cooked rice and a little salt, which we could not afford for ourselves, and this she handed to Kenny, stooping low and keeping her eyes down.

"My daughter Irawaddy," I said, proud that she should know her duties to a guest.

Kenny took the bowl from her with a smile.

"You are a good cook for one so young," he said, laying his hand for a moment on her head. She did not raise her eyes, but her face kindled, and I was pleased too that he should notice my child. He spoke to each of the

in turn until Murugan, my third son, came bouncing in
grasping his father by the hand

"You have heard me tell of Kenny often enough," I
said "This is he, friend to my father's house." So much
I said, and left the other unsaid.

My husband made namaskar.

"I have," he replied formally. "and I am happy that
we should honour our poor household by his presence"

"Yet not so poor," the other replied politely, "for the
women of your house do you credit, and you have begotten
five healthy sons."

My heart quailed at his words for fear he should betray
me, yet no betrayal, since how could he guess my husband
did not know I had gone to him for treatment? Why
had I, stupidest of women, not told him? I waited, gnawing
my lip, but he said no more

Kenny came often to our house thereafter. Of himself
he did not speak, of wife or children or parents or home.
I held my tongue, for I felt to ask would be to offend him.
Yet he had a love for children, mine were always eager
to see him, making great fuss of him when he came, and
he for his part would suffer them patiently, often bringing
with him half a coconut or ladus made of nuts and rolled
into balls with jaggery, which the children loved. Once he
came when I was suckling Selvam, my youngest son, who
had turned three, and saw that my breasts were sore where
the child's mouth had been.

"The boy is long past weaning," he said frowning "Why
do you force it?"

"We had to sell our goat," I said. "I can no longer
afford to buy milk, but while my son is young and needs
it I will give it to him."

Thereafter he brought me a little cow's milk when he
could, or sent it with one of the children from the village,
who were always glad to help him, for he had a way of
attracting children; there was ever a troop following him
about.

before, he came and went mysteriously. I knew
and the fact that he worked among the people of
every, treating and healing their bodies during long
then going to his lone dwelling; but when he left
e, for days or years at a time, nobody knew when
or what he did, and when he returned he was
more than ever and none dared ask.

CHAPTER VI

PT Ira as long as I could, but when she was past fourteen her marriage could be delayed no longer, for it is well known with what speed eligible young men are snapped up; as it was, most girls of her age were already married or at least betrothed. The choice of go-between is not easy to make: Kali was the nearest to hand and

might well consider them suitable husbands, which I certainly could not, for they owned no land. Old Granny, on the other hand, would be the ideal go-between: she was old and experienced, knew very well what to look for and never lacked patience; but for some years now I had not traded with her and she might with every justification refuse to do so for me. But in the end it was to her I went.

"A dowry of one hundred rupees," I said. "A maiden like a flower. Do your best for me and I shall be ever at your debt. Thus I ask you," I said, looking straight at her, "although Biswas takes my produce and for you there has been nothing."

"I bear you no grudge, Rukmani," she replied. "Times are hard and we must do what we can for ourselves and our children. I will do my best."

Thereafter never a week went by but she brought news of this boy or that, and she and I and Nathan spent long hours trying to assess their relative merits. At last we found one who seemed to fulfil our requirements: he was young and well favoured, the only son of his father from whom he would one day inherit a good portion of land.

"They will expect a large dowry," I said regretfully. "One hundred rupees will not win such a husband, we have no more."

"She is endowed with beauty," Old Granny said. "will make up for a small dowry—in this case."

She was right. Within a month the preliminaries completed, the day was fixed. Ira accepted our choice with her usual docility, if she fretted at the thought of leaving us and her brothers she showed no sign. Only once asked a little wistfully how frequently I would be able to visit her, and, although I knew such trips would have been very rare since her future home lay some ten villages away, I assured her not a year would pass without my going to see her two or three times.

"Besides, you will not want me so often," I said. "At home, your brothers, are all you have known so far when you have your own home and your own children will not miss these. . ."

She nodded slightly, making no comment, yet I how bruised she must be by the imminent parting. My spirit ached with pity for her, I longed to be able to comfort her, to convince her that in a few months' time her new home would be the most significant part of her life, the rest only a preparation . . . but before this joy could come the stress of parting, the loneliness of beginning new life among strangers, the strain of the early day marriage; and because I knew this the words would come. . .

Wedding day Women from the village came to assist Janaki, Kali, many I hardly knew. We went with her to the river and, when she was freshly bathed, put on the red sari I had worn at my own wedding. Its heavy folds made her look more slender than she was, made her look a child. I darkened her eyes with kohl and when years fell away more, she was so pitifully young I could hardly believe she was to be married, today.

The bridegroom arrived; his parents, his relatives, his friends, the priests. The drummer arrived and squatted on the side awaiting permission to begin; the fiddler joined him. There should have been other musicians—a flutist, a harmonium player, but we could not afford these. . .

ld have nothing we could not pay for. No debts, hated, no debts. But I grudged Ira nothing : had I not d from the day of her birth so that she should marry ? Now I brought out the stores I had put by month r month—rice and dhal and ghee, jars of oil, betel . areca nuts, chewing tobacco and copra
I didn't know you had so much," said Nathan in amazement.

And if you had there would be little enough," I said : a wink at the women, "for men are like children and t grab what they see"

did not wait for his retort, hearing only the laughter . greeted his sally, but went out to speak to the drum- . Arjun, my eldest son, was sitting next to the man, ously tapping the drum with three fingers as he had i shown

There is plenty of food inside," I said to him. "Go and while there is still some left"

I can eat no more," he replied "I have been feasting day."

Nevertheless he had made provision for the morrow . w in his lap a bundle bulging with food ; sugar-syrup butter had soaked through the cloth patchily.

Join your brothers," I said, hoisting him up "The mmer is going to be busy."

le ran off, clinging tightly to his bundle. The wedding ce began. Bride and groom were sitting uneasily side side, Ira stiff in the heavy embroidered sari, white flowers er hair, very pale. They did not look at each other. ut them were packed some fourteen or fifteen people— hut could hold no more. The remainder sat outside on n leaves the boys had collected.

What a good match,' everybody said 'Such a fine , such a beautiful girl, too good to be true.' It was ed. Old Granny went about beaming : it was . brought the two parties together ; her r . chmaker would be higher than ever. We ld look into the future.

So they were married. As the light faded two yoke appeared bearing a palanquin for the newly married couple lowered it at the entrance to the hut for them to step in. Now that it was time to go, Ira looked scared, she hesitated a little before entering : but already a dozen willing hands had lifted her in. The crowd, full of good feeling, mixed with food and drunk with the music, vicariously expressed round, eagerly thrusting over their heads garlands after garland of flowers, the earth was spattered with rain. In the midst of the crush Nathan and I, Nathan holding his hands to Ira in blessing, she with dark head bent to receive it. Then the palanquin was lifted up, the bearers closed in, the musicians took their places followed on foot behind, relatives, friends, well-wishers hangers-on. Several children had added themselves to company ; the came after, jigging about in high glee, and excited : a long, ragged tail-end to the procession.

Past the fields, through the winding streets of the village we went, the bobbing palanquin ahead of us. Until it came at last to where, at a decorous distance, the bull cart waited to take them away.

Then it was all over, the bustle, the laughter, the noise. The wedding guests departed. The throng melted. A while we walked back together to our hut. Our sons, too, were humped together asleep, the youngest clutching a sugary confection in one sticky fist. Bits of food lay everywhere. I swept the floor clean and strewed it with leaves. The walls showed cracks, and clods of mud had fallen where people had bumped against them, but these I kept for patching in the morning. The used plantain leaves stacked in one heap — they would do for the bullocks. The stars were pale in the greying night before I lay down beside my husband. Not to sleep but to think. For the first time since her birth, Ira no longer slept under our roof.

CHAPTER VII

ATURE is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk shyly with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat.

Ira had been given in marriage in the month of June, which is the propitious season for weddings, and what with preparing for it, and the listlessness that took hold of her in the first days after her departure, nothing was done to make our hut weatherproof or to secure the land from flooding. That year the monsoon broke early with an evil intensity such as none could remember before.

It rained so hard, so long and so incessantly that the thought of a period of no rain provoked a mild wonder. It was as if nothing had ever been but rain, and the water ruthlessly found every hole in the thatched roof to come in, dripping on to the already damp floor. If we had not built on high ground the very walls would have melted in that moisture. I brought out as many pots and pans as I had and we laid them about to catch the drips, but soon there were more leaks than we had vessels. Fortunately, I had laid in a stock of firewood for Ira's wedding, and the few sticks that remained served at least to cook our rice, and while the fire burnt, hissing at the water in the wood, we huddled round trying to get dry. At first the children were cheerful enough—they had not known such things before, and the lakes and rivulets that formed outside gave them endless delight, but Nathan and I watched with heavy hearts while the waters rose and rose and the tender green of the paddy field sank under and was lost.

"It is a bad season," Nathan said sombrely. "The rains have destroyed much of our work, there will be nothing done this year."

At his words, Arjun broke into doleful sobs and his teeth Thambi, followed suit. They were old enough to undertake but the others, who weren't, burst into tears too, for by now they were cramped and out of humour with sitting cross-legged on the damp floor; and hungry since there was little left for most of the food had gone to make the wedding feast and the new season's harvesting lay outside ungathered and rotting. I hushed them as best I could, throwing a reproachful glance at my husband for his careless words, but he was unnoticing, sunk in hatred and helplessness.

As night came on—the eighth night of the monsoon—the winds increased, whining and howling around our house as if seeking to pluck it from the earth. Indoors it was dark—the wick, burning in its shallow saucer of oil, gave only a dim wavering light—but outside the land glimmered sometimes pale and sometimes vivid, in the flicker of lightning. Towards midnight the storm was at its worst. Lightning kept clawing at the sky almost continuously, thunder shook the earth. I shivered as I looked—for I could not sleep, and even a prayer came with difficulty.

"It cannot last," Nathan said. "The storm will abate by the morning."

Even as he spoke a streak of lightning threw itself down at the earth, there was a tremendous clap of thunder, and when I uncovered my shrinking eyes I saw that our coconut palm had been struck. That, too, the storm had claimed for its own.

In the morning everything was calm. Even the rain had stopped. After the fury of the night before, an oppressive stillness lay on the land. I went out to see if anything could be saved of the vegetables, but the shoots and vines were battered and broken, torn from their supports and bruised; they did not show much sign of surviving. The corn field was lost. Our paddy field lay beneath a plastered thatched roof on which the children were already sailing bits of wood.

Many of our neighbours fared much worse than we had. Several were homeless, and of a group of men who

der a tree when the storm began six had been killed by lightning.

Kali's hut had been completely destroyed in the last final fury of the storm. The roof had been blown away bodily, the mud walls had crumbled.

"At least it stood until the worst was over," said Kali to me, "and by God's grace we were all spared." She looked worn out, in the many years I had known her I had never seen her so deflated. She had come to ask for fine palm leaves to thatch the new hut her husband was building; but I could only point to the blackened tree, its head bitten off and hanging by a few fibres from the withered stump.

"We must thatch our roof before the night," I said. "The rains may come again. We need rice too."

Nathan nodded. "We may be able to buy palm leaves in the village — also rice."

He went to the granary in a corner of which the small cloth bundle of our savings lay buried. It had been heavy once, when we were newly married. Now the faded rag in which it was tied was too big and the ends flapped loosely over the knot. Nathan untied it and counted out twelve rupees.

"One will be enough," I said. "Let us go."

"I will take two. We can always put it back."

In the village the storm had left disaster and desolation worse than on our own doorstep. Uprooted trees sprawled their branches in ghastly fashion over streets and houses, flattening them and the bodies of men and women indiscriminately. Sticks and stones lay scattered wildly in angry confusion. The tannery stood, its bricks and cement had held it together despite the raging winds, but the workers' huts, of more flimsy construction, had been demolished. The thatch had been ripped from some, where others stood there was now only a heap of mud with their owners' possessions studding them in a kind of pitiless decoration. The corrugated iron shacks in which some of the men lived were no more: here and there we could see the

iron sheets in unexpected places — suspended from trees or blown and embedded on to the walls of houses still standing. There was water everywhere, the overflowing into the streets. Dead dogs, cats and pigs cluttered the roadside, or floated starkly on the waters, blown distended bellies.

People were moving about amid this destruction, picking out a rag here, a bundle there, hugging those things that they thought to be theirs, moving haltingly and with a lot of despair about them. People we knew came and spoke to us in low voices, gesturing hopelessly.

"Let us go," I said "It is no good, we will not go back later."

We turned back, the two rupees unspent. Our children came running out to meet us, their faces bright with hope.

"The shops are closed or destroyed," I said "Go inside, I will get you some gruel presently."

Their faces faded, the two younger ones began crying restlessly from hunger and disappointment. I had no words to comfort them.

At dusk the drums of calamity began, their grating throbbing rhythm came clearly through the night, throughout the night, each beat, each tattoo, echoing the mighty impotence of our human endeavour. I listened. I could not sleep. In the sound of the drums I understood a vast pervading doom, but in the expectant silences between my own disaster loomed larger, more consequent, and more painful.

We ventured out again when the waters had subsided a little, taking with us as before two rupees. This time things were somewhat better, the streets were clear, but were going up everywhere. My spirits rose.

"To Hanuman first for rice," said Nathan, excited. "The gruel we have been swallowing has been almost plain water these last few days."

I quickened my steps: my stomach began heaving at the thought of food.

the doorway of his shop. He
 "You have come for rice,"
 rice. I have none to sell,
 enough for my wife and children."

And yet you are a merchant who deals in rice?"

And what if so? Are you not growers of it? Why
 do you come to me? If I have rice I do not choose
 to sell it now; but I have told you, I have none."

We ask for only a little. We will pay for what we
 need—see, here is the money."

No, no rice, but—wait... they say Biswas is selling...
 can try..."

So Biswas "We come for rice. Look, here is our
 money."

Two rupees? How much do you think you can buy
 for two rupees?"

We thought—"

Never mind what you thought! Is this not a time of
 scarcity? Can you buy rice anywhere else? Am I not
 obliged to charge more for that? Two ollocks I will let
 you have and that is charity."

It is very little for two rupees—"

Take it or leave it. I can get double that sum from
 the tanners, but because I know you—"

We take it, we give up the silver coins. Now there is
 nothing left for the thatching, unless we use a rupee or two
 of the ten that remain in the granary.

I put the rice in my sari, tuck the precious load securely
 at the waist. We turn back. On the outskirts of the
 village there is Kenny. His face is grim and long, his eyes
 burning in his pallid face. He sees us and comes up.
 You too are starving, I suppose."

I tap the roll at my waist—the grains give at my touch.
 We have a little rice—it will last us until times are
 better."

"Times are better, times are better," he shouts. "Times
 will not be better for many months. Meanwhile—
 starve and die, you meek suffering fools."

keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand—out for help—do something? There is nothing in country, oh God, there is nothing!”

We shrink from his violence. What can we do—can he mean? The man is raving. We go on our way.

The paddy was completely destroyed; there would be no rice until the next harvesting. Meanwhile, we lived on what remained of our salted fish, roots and leaves, the fruit of the prickly pear, and on the plantains from our garden. At last the time came for the rice terraces to be drained and got ready for the next sowing. Nathan told me with cheer in his voice and I told the children, pleased for the fields were full of fish that would feed us for a day. Then we waited, spirits lifting, eyes sparkling, bellies painful with anticipation.

At last the day. Nathan went to break the dams with I with him and with me our children, sunken-eyed, as they had not been for many days at the thought of a feast, carrying nets and baskets. First one hole, then another, no bigger than a finger's width, until they had eroded the sides and the outlets grew large enough for two fists to go through. Against them we held our feet firm and braced in the mud while the water ran away, and the fish came tumbling into them. When the water was all gone, there they were caught in the mud and among the paddy, shoals of them leaping madly, and silver and good to look upon. We gathered them with flying fingers and greedy hearts and bore them away in triumph, with a glow at least as bright as the sun on their shining scales. Then we came and gathered up what remained of the paddy and took it away to thresh in the winnow.

Late that night we were still at work, cleaning the fish, hulling the rice, separating the grain from the husk. When we had done, the rice yield was meagre—no more than two measures—all that was left of the year's harvest from the year's labour.

We ate, finding it difficult to believe we did so. The old food lay rich, if uneasy, in our starved bellies. Already the children were looking better, and at the sight of their faces, still pinched but content, a great weight fell from me. Today we would eat and tomorrow, and for many weeks while the grain lasted. Then there was the rice, cleaned, dried and salted away, and before that was the time we should earn some more money; I would plant more vegetables. Such dreams, delightful, orderly, satisfying, but of the stuff of dreams, wraithlike. And sleep, that sleep... deep and sweet and sound as I had not known for many nights; it claimed me even as I sat amid the rice stalks and fish scales and drying salt.

CHAPTER VIII

KUNTHI's two eldest sons were among the first in the village to start work at the tannery, and between them brought home more than a man's wages.

"You see," said Kunthi. "The tannery is a boon to us. Have I not said so since it began? We are no longer a village either, but a growing town. Does it not do good just to think of it?"

"Indeed no," said I, "for it is even as I said, and money buys less and less. As for living in a town, town this is—why, there is nothing I would fly from if I could go back to the sweet quiet of village life. It is all noise and crowds everywhere, and rude young hooligans idling in the street and dirty bazaars and unbecoming behaviour, and no man thinks of another but schemes for his money."

"Words and words," said Kunthi. "Stupid words. I wonder they call us senseless peasant women, but I am and never will be. There is no earth in my breeding."

"If there were you would be the better for it," said I wrathfully, "for then your values would be true."

Kunthi only shrugged her delicate shoulders and left. She spent a lot of her time making unnecessary journeys into the town where, with her good looks and provocative body, she could be sure of admiration, and more, from the young men. At first the women said it and the men said they were jealous, then men too began to notice and remark on it and wonder why her husband did nothing. "Now if I were in his place," they said, "but they are ordinary wives, not a woman with fire and beauty in her and the skill to use them—besides which, he was a good dull man."

"Let her be," said Janaki. "She is a trollop, and anxious only that there should be a supply of men."

Her voice held both anger and a bitter hopelessness : a long time now her husband's shop had been doing idly. He was unable to compete with the other bigger shopkeepers whom the easy money to be had from the miners had drawn to the new town.

A few days after our conversation the shop finally closed down. Nobody asked 'Where do you go from here?' They did not say, 'What is to become of us?' We waited, and one day they came to bid us farewell, carrying their possessions, with their children trailing behind, all but the best, whom the tannery had claimed. Then they were gone, and the shopkeepers were glad that there was less competition, and the worker who moved into their hut was pleased to have a roof over his head, and we remembered them for a while and then took up our lives again.

It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Night and day the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw material in—thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins—and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities—or that so many animals existed—but so it was, incredibly.

The officials of the tannery had increased as well. Apart from the white man we had first seen—who owned the tannery and lived by himself—there were some nine or ten Muslims under him. They formed a little colony of their own, living midway between the town and open country in brick cottages with whitewashed walls and red-tiled roofs. The men worked hard, some of them until late at night, the women—well, they were a queer lot, and their way of life was quite different from ours. What they did in their houses I do not know, for they employed servants to do the work; but they stayed mostly indoors or if they went out at all they went veiled in bourkas. It was their religion, it was told: they would not appear before any man but their husband. Sometimes when I caught sight of a figure

in voluminous draperies swishing through the streets a blazing sun, or of a face peering through a window shutter, I felt desperately sorry for them, deprived of ordinary pleasures of knowing warm sun and cool breeze upon their flesh, of walking out light and free, or of ~~meeting~~ with men and working beside them.

"They have their compensations," Kali said drily. "is an easy life, with no worry for the next meal and pleasure always at hand. I would gladly wear a bourka and be veiled for the rest of my life if I, too, could be sure of such things."

"For a year perhaps," I said, "not for ever. Who could endure such a filtering of sunlight and fresh air as this do?"

"You chatter like a pair of monkeys," said Kali's band, "with less sense. What use to talk of exchange and so forth? Their life is theirs and yours is yours, no change nor exchange is possible."

Once, and once only, I actually saw one of those women close. I was taking a few vegetables to market when I saw her beckoning me to come indoors. I did so, and as soon as the door was closed the woman threw off her veil. It was better to select what she wanted. Her face was pale, the bones small and fine. Her eyes were pale and curious light brown matching her silky hair. She told me what she wanted and paid me. Her fingers, fair and slender, were laden with jewelled rings, any one of which would have served us for a year. She smiled at me as I went out, then quickly lowered the veil again about her face. I never saw her again. There was something about those closed doors and shuttered windows that struck coldly at me, used as they were as to open fields and the sky and the unfettered sight of the sun.

CHAPTER IX

ONE morning I was pounding some red chillies into powder. *Cho-chup!* went the pestle into the mortar, crushing the brittle chillies and the seeds in them. Each time it fell, a fine, red dust rose up, spreading a rich, vivid smell in the air. A pleasant smell, hot and pungent, which made my nostrils water and squirted the tears into my eyes, so that every few minutes I had to stop to wipe them. It was a fine, peaceful morning, not a sound from the tannery, which for one blessed day in the week closed down completely. Each time I paused I could hear sparrows chattering, and the thin, clear note of a minah.

Into view on the horizon came two figures, moving very slowly. I went on with my pounding. The figures grew larger every time I looked up, and then when they were still a fair distance away I recognised my daughter. I had seen her only once since her marriage, and since then over a year had passed. Excited, I gathered up the chilli powder and put it away, rinsed my eyes, washed my face and came out. On the doorstep I traced out a colam, a pattern in white rice flour to welcome them.

They approached slowly, as if their feet were somehow weighted, not with the lightness which should have brought them quickly to my side. 'Something is wrong,' I thought. 'Young people should not walk thus.' And when I saw their faces the words of welcome I had ready died unuttered.

In silence Ira knelt at my feet. I raised her up quietly, with hammering heart. "Let us go in," I said. "You must be tired."

Ira entered obediently. Her husband stood stiffly outside. "Come," I said again, "sit and rest for a while. You have travelled a long way"

"Mother-in-law," he said, "I intend no discourtesy, this is no ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a woman."

"You have not been married long," I said with dryness. "She may be as I was, she may yet conceive."

"I have waited five years," he replied. "She has borne in her first blooming, who can say she will conceive later? I need sons."

I summoned Nathan from the fields. The tale was repeated, our son-in-law departed.

"I do not blame him," Nathan said. "He is just for a man needs children. He has been patient."

"Not patient enough," I said. "Not patient like beloved."

Ira was sitting with her face in her arms. She looked up as her father and I came in and her mouth was a little, loosely, as if she had no control over her lips. She was lovely still, but strain and hopelessness had shadowed her eyes and lined her forehead. She seemed almost to back away as I went to her.

"Leave me alone, Mother. I have seen this coming a long time. The reality is much easier to bear than imaginings. At least now there is no more fear, no necessity for lies and concealment."

"There should never have been," I said. "Are we your parents? Did you think we would blame you for what is not your fault?"

"There are others," she replied. "Neighbours, women, and I a failure, a woman who cannot even bear a child."

All this I had gone through — the torment, the anxiety. Now the whole dreadful story was repeating itself, and it was my daughter this time.

"Hush," I said. "We are all in God's hands, and He is merciful."

My thoughts went to Kenny. He can help, I thought, surely he can do something. My crushed spirit revived a little.

About this time Arjun was in his early teens. He was all for his age and older than his years. I had taught him the little I knew of reading and writing; now he could have taught me and most other people in the town. I do not know how he did it, for we could not afford to send him to school or to buy him books. Yet he always had a book or two by him, about which he grew vague if I asked questions, and spent many hours writing on scraps of paper collected, or even, when he had none, on the bare earth. Secretly I was glad, for I saw my father in him, although sometimes my husband worried that he showed no inclination for the land; but when one day he told me he was going to work in the tannery I was acutely dismayed. It seemed it was going to be neither the one thing nor the other, neither land nor letters, which was to claim him.

"You are young," I attempted to dissuade him. "Besides, you are not of the caste of tanners. What will our relations say?"

"I do not know," he said. "I do not care. The important thing is to eat."

How heartless are the young! One would have thought from his words we had purposely starved him, when in fact of what there was he always got the biggest share after my husband.

"So," I said, "we do not do enough for you. These
They do not make good

he said "It is not enough.
ired of seeing my brothers
especially since Ira came
to live with us"

"You would grudge your own sister a mouthful," I cried, "who eats half what I give her so that you boys can have the more!"

"The more reason for me to earn," rejoined Arjun. "I do not grudge food to her or to you. I am only concerned that there is so little."

He was right of course. The harvests had been very low and shop prices were higher than ever.

"Well," I said. "Go if you must. You speak like a man although you are a child still. But I do not know whether you can obtain work at the tannery. People there they have all the labour they want."

"Kunthi's son will help me," he replied. "He has promised."

I did not want to be indebted to Kunthi, or to her son. She was so different from us, sly and secretive, with a contemptuous air about her which in her son was almost to insolence. He had inherited her looks too, at least the knowledge of it lay in his bold eyes. A handsome, swaggering youth, not for my son.

"There is no need to go through him," I said with determination. "I will ask Kenny to help you. What have you to say?"

"Indeed they have," he said bitterly. "Over men's heads, and especially over women."

"What do you mean?" I said to him. "Speak with a plain tongue or not at all."

He looked at me obliquely with darkening eyes, but said no more.

A few days later he began working at the tannery, before long Thambi, my second son, had joined him. So of them had been very close to each other from earliest years, and it was not strange that Thambi should follow his brother. Nathan and I both tried to dissuade him, but without avail. My husband especially had been looking forward to the day when they would join him working on the land, but Thambi only shook his head.

"If it were your land, or mine," he said, "I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another's land when I get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice."

Nathan said not a word. There was a crushed look about him which spoke of the deep hurt he had suffered more than any words could have done. He had always been

own his own land, through the years there had been the hope, growing fainter with each year, each child, that one day he would be able to call a small portion of land his own. Now even his sons knew it would never be. Like his brother before him, Thambi had found the cruellest words of any.

Yet they were good sons, considerate of us, patient with us, always giving us a fair share of their earnings. With their money we began once again to live well. In the granary, unused for so long, I stored away half a bag of rice, two measures of dhal and nearly a pound of chillies. Hitherto, almost all we grew had been sold to pay the rent of the land; now we were enabled to keep some of our own produce. I was especially pleased that I had not been forced to sell all the chillies, for these are useful to us; when the tongue rebels against plain boiled rice, desiring heat and salt and spices which one cannot afford, the sharp heat of a chillie renders even plain rice palatable. I was able at last to thatch our hut again, substantially, with four or three bindings of leaves. For the first time in years I bought clothes for the older children, a sari for myself, and although he protested I bought for my husband a dhoti which he badly needed, since the other was in rags and scarcely covered his loins. Both he and I had the garments we had worn at our daughter's marriage, but these we never thought of wearing. whatever hardships our day-to-day living might have, we were determined not to disgrace our sons on the day of their weddings.

CHAPTER X

DEEPAVALI, the Festival of Lights, approached. It is a festival mainly for the children, but of course for one who can take part. I twisted cotton into wicks, soaked them in oil and placed them in mud saucers ready to be lit at night. To the children I handed out two or three apiece, to be spent on fireworks. I had never been able to do so before -- in previous years we had contented ourselves with watching other people's fireworks, or with going down to the bonfire in the village, and even now I felt queasy about wasting money on such quickly spent pleasures; their rapturous faces overcame my misgivings. 'It is but once,' I thought, 'a memory.'

As it grew dark we lit the tapers and wicks and circled our dwelling with light. A feathery breeze stirring, setting the flames leaping and dancing, their reflections in the black glistening oil cavorting too. In town and in the houses nearby, hundreds of small beads were beginning to flash, now and then a rocket would hurtle into the sky, break and pour out its riches like precious jewels into the darkness. As the night went on, the crack and spit of exploding fireworks increased. The children had bought boxes of coloured matches and strings of pattis and a few pice worth of crackers, like small nuts, which split in two with a loud bang amid a shower of sparks when lit. The last were the most popular -- the boys pranced round shrieking with laughter and throwing the crackers about everywhere, yet they were nimble enough to skip out of harm's way. All except Selvam, the youngest. He stood a safe distance away, legs apart and obviously ready to run, holding a stick of sugarcane nearly as tall as himself, which he had bought instead of fireworks.

"Go and play," I said to him. "Deepavali comes but

ice a year and this is the first time we have bought fireworks. Do not lose the opportunity."

"I am afraid," he said frankly, his small face serious. After we had eaten, and rather well, and there were crackers left, and the oil in the saucers had run dry, I walked to the town. Selvam refused to come. He was a stubborn child; I knew it was useless to try and persuade him. Ira stayed behind too, saying she preferred to stay with him. I think she was glad of the excuse he provided, for since her return she had not cared to be concerned about, and of course there would be a large crowd in the town. Villagers from all round, like us, were converging towards the bonfire to be lit there, already smoke wisps were curling towards the clouds, torches were beginning to flare. The smell of oil was everywhere, heavy and pungent, exciting the senses. Our steps quickened, bicker and quicker, greedy, wanting to encompass everything, to miss not one iota of pleasure. Then as happens often in the brightest moment, I remembered Janaki. Last year she had come with us, she and her children. This year who knew—or cared? The black thought momentarily doused the glow within me, then, angered and indignant, I thrust the intruder away, chasing it, banishing it. Freed of gloom, reaching desperately for perfection of delight, which can surely never be

There was a great noise everywhere. Men, women and children from the tannery and the fields had come out, many of them in new clothes such as we too had donned, the girls and women with flowers in their hair and glass bangles at their wrists and silver rings on their toes, and those who could afford it wore silver golsu clasped round their ankles and studded belts around their waists.

In the centre of the town the bonfire was beginning to moulder. For many weeks the children had been collecting brushwood, rags, leaves and brushwood, and the result was a huge pile like an enormous ant-hill, into which the flames ate fiercely, hissing and crackling and rearing up as

on the bits of camphor and oil-soaked rags that I threw in.

In the throng I lost Nathan and the boys, or they lost me—at any rate we got separated. I gave my way through the crush, this way and that, not giving an inch, in my efforts to find them; and in the end I had to give up. Before long, in the heat and excite-
I forgot them. Drums had begun to beat, the fire blazing fiercely, great long orange tongues consuming fuel and thrusting upwards and sometimes outwards to engulf the watchers. As each searching flame I round, the crowd leaned away from its grasp, straight as the wind and the flames changed direction; so that was a constant swaying movement like the waving of grasses. The heat was intense—faces gleamed ruddy firelight, one or two women had drawn their saris over their eyes.

Leaping, roaring to climax, then the strength from fury, a quietening. Slowly, one by one, the men gave up their colour and dropped, until at last there were none left—only a glowing heap, ashen-edged. The drums died to a murmur. The scent of jasmine mingled with the fumes of camphor and oil, and a smell, that of toddy, which several of the men had been drinking—many to excess, for they were lurching and loud-mouthed and more than ordinarily merry. I looked about for my family and at last saw my husband, who seemed to have gone mad. He had one son seated on his shoulders and one son at each hip, and was bounding about on the fringes of the crowd to the peril of my children; to the amusement of the people. I fought my way to him. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" I cried out above the din.

"No; only of my cares," he shouted gaily, capering about with the children clinging delightedly to him. "Do you not feel joy in the air?"

He sounded so light of heart I could not help smiling.

"I feel nothing," I said, going up to him. "Perhaps is the toddy that makes the feeling."

"Not a drop," he said, coming up to me. "Smell!"

"You are too tall—I cannot," I replied.

"Lift her up," somebody yelled, and a dozen voices repeated the cry: "Lift her up, lift her up!"

My husband looked at me solemnly. "I will," he said, dropping his sons he seized me and swung me high in front of all those people. Several of the women were laughing at him indulgently, the children were twittering with pleasure.

"Whatever will they say," I said, my face burning as I let me down again. "At our age too! You ought to be ashamed!"

"That I am not," he said, winking, to the vast delight of the onlookers. "I am happy because life is good and children are good, and you are the best of all."

What more could I say after that?

Nathan sang loudly all the way back. He was in high spirits. The children, tired out, clumped along in silence, the youngest with frequent pleas to be carried; and when I took no notice he began snuffling.

It was a very hot night—Selvam and Ira were sleeping in the open, in the small square in front of our hut such I had swept and washed with dung that morning. The others stretched themselves out and were asleep almost as they lay down. Nathan had lost none of his good humour. He seemed very wide awake. I stretched myself out beside him, close to him in the darkness, and as we reached he turned abruptly towards me. Words died away, the listening air was very still, the black night waited. In the straining darkness I felt his body moving with desire, his hands on me were trembling, and I felt my senses opening like a flower to his urgency. I closed my eyes and waited, waited in the darkness while my being filled with a wild, ecstatic fluttering, waited for him to come to me.

CHAPTER XI

ONE of my husband's male relatives had died and had to attend the funeral. When he had gone I had the opportunity of going to see Kenny. I had not done so before because I was sure Nathan would not like wife or his daughter going to a white man, a ~~lover~~. My father had been different—but Nathan, I felt, would not approve. And if he did not, the one chance I had would be lost, and this made it the more important that he should not know. I explained this to Ira cautiously and she nodded listlessly and said yes, it was a necessary precaution, but she did not look at me and she showed no enthusiasm. I was getting more and more worried about her: she moped about, dull of hair and eye, as if the sweetness of life had departed—as indeed it has for a woman who is abandoned by her husband.

Kenny was working in the small building they had up near the tannery. I could see him whenever the door opened to let someone out. There was a long line of people waiting; I squatted some distance away. The day was on. The sun had set, the glow of twilight was fading with darkness, before he came out. He looked grim and tired, his eyes were burning, there was an air of such personal cruelty about him that despite myself I shivered.

"No more tonight," he said briefly to the assembled crowd and stepping down from the verandah he strode away. I waited till the crowd dispersed, then I followed. He was walking quickly with long strides, I had to run to catch up. He stopped at last when he heard my footsteps and waited for me to come up, frowning so that I began to feel afraid.

"I said no more tonight. Did you not hear me? Do you think I am made of iron?"

"I waited all day," I gasped. "I must see you."

his frown deepened. He said coldly, "You people will not learn. It is pitiful to see your foolishness."

"It is for my daughter I come," I said. "She cannot marry; she is as I was."

"You will be a mother even before she is," he replied with a glimmer of a smile, "for it seems you have no culture."

"It is so," I said. "I would it were otherwise and she in my condition, for she is much afflicted since her husband is of no use for her."

"Why did she not come then," he said, "since it is her duty?" It would have been more sensible."

There was an edge to his voice, and his mouth twisted in exasperation.

"Forgive me," I whispered, quaking. "I was not sure—" To my surprise, he put both hands on my shoulders, compelling me to look at him, and I saw he was laughing.

"I am sorry I frightened you," he said. "You should not act like a timid calf at your age. As for your daughter, I will do what I can—but remember, no promises."

He turned and was gone. I sat down to think, and to collect my wits. When at last I rose to go, a full moon was shining, golden and enormous, very low in the sky.

I went on to the narrow foot-path, walking swiftly and

calling my name from behind, shouting wildly at my breast, and then I saw it was Kunthi, standing where the path forked with the moonlight streaming full down her face.

"You startled me," I said, "I did not expect—"

"That I can see," she said coolly, coming towards me. "You keep late hours, Rukmani."

"No later than yours," I replied, not liking her tone. "I have my reasons."

"Of course," she said softly, derision in her voice. "We all have reasons."

"Mine are not the same as yours," I said with surveying her. She came very close, so close that I the rose petals in her hair, saw the paint on her

"Meaning?"

"That we live differently. It is charitable to say so. Let me pass."

She stood squarely in my path. "I would not thought it," she said slowly, "had I not seen for

"Thought what," I said "Seen what?"

"That you have so much passion in your body," said insolently, "that you seek assuagement thus. husband would give much to know where you have tonight."

I saw her mouth forming these words, her eyes hooded and mocking, then I saw her face suddenly to mine and did not realise I had thrown myself until I felt her body in my grip. An overwhelming possessed me, I kept shaking her furiously, I could stop. Her slender body was no match for mine. Her head fell back, the thin sari she wore slipped from shoulders. Then I saw that it was not tied at the waist below the navel, like a strumpet's, and that she looked below. Sandalwood paste smeared her swelling. Under her breasts were dark painted shadows which in their sensuous depth, the nipples were tipped with red. I released her. She stood there before me panting, her hair shaken loose and coiling about her shoulders.

"Guard your tongue," I said, "or it will be the worse for you."

She said nothing for a moment, while she rearranged her garments, recovering herself a little, then once again her saddening, insulting half-smile curved her lips.

"And for you," she said, with knives in her voice, "and for your precious husband"

With that she was gone.

I went alone to summon my daughter's husband.

"Take her back," I said "There is nothing for her now, she will bear you many sons yet."

"I would," he replied, with a hint of sorrow in his eyes, "she was a good wife to me, and a comely one, but I waited long and now I have taken another woman" and went away. Ira was waiting, eagerness shining from

"You must not blame him," I said. "He has taken another woman."

He said not a word. I repeated what I had said, for she seemed not to understand, but she only looked at me with dry eyes.

Hereafter her ways became even more strange. She spent hours out in the country by herself, spoke little, withdrew completely into herself and went about her tasks with full hopelessness that daunted me. No one could see her now the warm lovely creature she had been except sometimes when Selvam came to her, perching on her lap, coaxing a smile from her, for she always had a special place for him. As my pregnancy advanced she turned completely away from me. Sometimes I saw her looking at me with brooding, resentful eyes, and despite myself I could not help wondering if hatred lay behind her glance.

Then at last my child was born, a nicely formed boy, smaller than the others had been, but of course I was proud of him now. We nicknamed him Kutu, which means tiny, he being a happy, untroublesome baby everybody took pleasure in his arrival. None more so than Ira. The transformation in her was astonishing as it was inexplicable. I had feared she might dislike the child, but now it was as if he were her own. She lost her dreary air, her face became animated, the bloom of youth came back to her.

"Our daughter is herself again," said Nathan to me. "I have heard her carolling like a bird."

"She is happy with the child," I replied, "but I do not know what is to become of her in the future."

"Always worrying," he chided. "Is it not a mercy that she is young again, should one not be grateful?"

He was a man and did not understand. How could I stop worrying? We had no money to leave her. Who

would look after her when we were gone and the ¹ were married with families of their own? With ² it was perhaps possible she might marry again, ³ it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and barren.

No one had been more upset about the outcome of marriage than Old Granny. It was she who had the match, and though failing in health she thought it duty to come to me. She had aged considerably ⁴ last time I had seen her. She walked slowly, before each step to gather strength for the next; her kept up a slight, shuddering movement like the flutter of a bee on a flower.

"No fault of yours, or the girl's or her husband's told her. "It is Fate. Nevertheless, I do not like to of the future"

"Why fear?" said the old lady. "Am I not ⁵ alone, do I not manage?"

I thought of her sitting in the street all day long the gunny-sacking in front of her piled with a few worth of nuts and vegetables; and I thought of Ira the same thing, and I was silent

"It is not unbearable," said she, watching me with shrewd eyes. "One gets used to it"

It is true, one gets used to anything. I had got to the noise and the smell of the tannery, they so affected me I had seen the slow, calm beauty of village wilt in the blast from the town, and I grieved more; so now I accepted the future and Ira's lot in it thrust it from me; only sometimes when I was weak in sleep while my will lay dormant, I found myself bellicious, protesting, rejecting, and no longer calm.

CHAPTER XII

NE day in each week, when the tannery stopped work, Arjun and Thambi would help their father on the land, and this gave Nathan great pleasure. He liked to see his sons beside him, to teach them the ways of the earth : how to sow ; to transplant ; to reap ; to know the wholesome from the rotten, the unwelcome reed from the paddy ; and how to irrigate or drain the terraces. In these matters he had no master, and I think it helped him to know he could impart knowledge to his sons, more skilled though they were in other things, and able to read and write better than any in the town.

The rest of the week they worked at the tannery, going there soon after daybreak and not coming back until it was dark. *By the time they had entered their late teens* they were earning good wages : a rupee for each day's work, and without fail they would hand me their earnings, keeping nothing back for gaming or whoring as many of the lads did. Each morning I cooked rice for them, sometimes dhal or vegetables as well, which they took with them to eat at midday ; and when they came home I gave them rice-water and dried fish, sometimes a little buttermilk or perhaps even a few plantains I had kept from selling. But from what they gave me I had also to buy clothes for them, for they were expected to put on shirts over their tun-cloths, and red turbans on their heads, so that although they had full bellies and were well clothed there was not much left over, and the hope I secretly cherished of putting by some money for Ira soon withered ; and when it finally died I recovered my peace of mind and was happy enough.

If there was nothing to be done in the fields, Nathan would accompany me when I went to market. This happened so seldom that it was always an occasion, and so round it off we would go to the tannery to see

Of course ours was not the only family involved. There were several others, among them Kali's, and she could bemoan the result.

"Two more mouths to feed," she complained. "One of my three sons had the sense to go back. I do not know what is to become of us, for the land cannot support us all. So much for reading and writing," she said, pointing me with eye and finger. "Did I not say no good would come of it? Now look into what mess your sons have led us!"

"Ay, and out of it to better things," said Thambi bluntly in his voice, "but for spawn like yours who have themselves cheaper than dirt."

"You will speak with respect," I cried, "or else I will not listen." Then Nathan interrupted, so violently that I started. "Enough!" he shouted. "More than enough has been said. Our children must act as they choose to, not for our benefit. Is it not enough that they suffer?"

The veins on his forehead were bulging. I had never seen him so angry before. Kali went away. Then the men, too, father and sons, leaving me alone who had no one standing.

Once more Nathan was sole provider for us, and we had the good living we had known. The reserves of grain laid up by me began to dwindle despite my care. Fortunately harvest time was near, and I consoled myself with the thought of it.

Arjun and Thambi began to frequent the town more and more, coming and going at all hours with no word as to what they did, and I suffered it in silence, for I knew I had no money to lead them to harm, and I had no the restlessness that afflicted them.

One morning I was laying out some clothes to dry in the sun when Selvam came running in, his face hot and

"Tom-toms are beating," he announced breathlessly. "The town is full of drummers, they are calling for men."

I stopped my work and gazed at him, and all at once my heart turned over. It was as if a scene long past

urring again — this was not Selvam but Arjun, and he
 bringing
 and over

ing, eager
 repeated
 interest

I was forgotten.

When they had gone — a triumphant Selvam in the van
 and the place was quiet, I did indeed hear the drums,
 filed and distant, insisiently calling. 'Well,' I thought.
 it concerns me I shall hear soon enough, and if not I
 ll have saved myself a walk.' So with ordinary things
 ight to still my qualms.

"They are calling for labourers," Arjun said, not looking
 "It would be a good opportunity for us."

ly Arjun and Thambi, who had stayed in the town
 ll nightfall, and my husband and I, were up. The others
 e long asleep.

"They are paying well," Arjun resumed. "It would be
 d for us to work again. It is not fitting that men should
 upt themselves in hunger and idleness."

"I have heard," said Nathan, "that labour is required
 ou not here, but in the island of Ceylon."

"Yes. It is work in the tea plantations of Ceylon."

"You may not have the knowledge for such work."

"They will teach us — they have said so."

"Who will pay for the journey — is it not one of many
 idreds of miles?"

"True. They will arrange everything, and everything will
 paid for."

o Nathan was silenced, for he saw they were men and
 i made their decisions, but how could I let them go,
 o were my own flesh and blood, without a fight?

"Promises," I said. "Fair words. Who is to see if
 : honoured? What is to happen if they are"

"They need labour," Arjun said drily. "Self-
 ll keep these promises."

her than two days' journeying, and that it is a good se that takes him? Kenny himself has assured you hat—you should be grateful that he has recommended son."

"I am indeed," I said, flat and dispirited "He has e much for us."

"You brood too much," Nathan said, "and think only our trials, not of the joys that are still with us. Look ur land—is it not beautiful? The fields are green and grain is ripening It will be a good harvest year, there be plenty."

le coaxed me out into the sunlight and we sat down ther on the brown earth that was part of us, and we d at the paddy fields spreading rich and green before and they were indeed beautiful. The air was cool and yet the paddy caught what little movement there was, ling slightly one way and the next with soft whispering one time there had been kingfishers here, flashing between young shoots for our fish, and paddy birds; and some- s, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingoes, ling with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with mage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no re, for the tannery lay close—except crows and kites and h scavenging birds, eager for the town's offal, or some- es a pal-pitta, skimming past with raucous cry but never pping, perhaps dropping a blue-black feather in flight to ight the children.

Nathan went and plucked a few green stems and brought m to me "See how firm and strong they are—no sign disease at all And look, the grain is already forming" I took the paddy from him and parted the grass and re within its protective husk lay the rice-grain, just big ough to see, white, perfect, and holding in itself our lives. "It promises a good harvest," he repeated eagerly.

"We shall be able to pay the landlord, and eat, and haps even put by a little. We may even make visit our son—would not that be good?"

among you when my spirit wills it...I go when I am of your follies and stupidities, your eternal, shameful ty. I can only take you people," he said, "in small

was silent, taking no offence Barbed words, but what from one so gentle? Harsh talk from one in whom springs of tenderness gushed abundant, as I knew.

told you what I did, in a moment of lunacy," he "I do not want it repeated."

am not cursed with a gossip's tongue," I said, annoyed could not repeat what you have said "

Never. Understand? "

understand."

rose to his feet and without another word was gone, ing with long, quick strides and stooping a little as ys A strange nature, only partly within my understanding. A man half in shadow, half in light, defying vledge.

CHAPTER XIII

THAT year the rains failed. A week went by. We stared at the cruel sky, calm, blue, indifferent to our need. We threw ourselves on the earth and wept. I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to my God and I wept at her feet. I thought she looked at me with compassion and I went away comforted, but no rain came. "Perhaps tomorrow," my husband said. "It is not late."

We went out and scanned the heavens, clear and beautiful, deadly beautiful, not one cloud to mar its serenity. Others did so too, coming out, as we did, to gaze at the sky and murmur, 'Perhaps tomorrow.'

Tomorrows came and went and there was no rain. No longer said perhaps, only a faint spark of hope, obstinately refusing to die, brought him out each dawn to look at the heavens for a sign.

Each day the level of the water dropped and the level of the paddy hung lower. The river had shrunk to a trickle. The well was as dry as a bone. Before long the shocks of the paddy were tipped with brown, even as we saw the stain spread like some terrible disease, choking out the green that meant life to us.

Harvesting time, and nothing to reap. The paddy taken all our labour and lay now before us in laden, less heaps.

Sivaji came to collect his master's dues and his fell when he saw how much was lost, for he was a good man and he felt for us.

"There is nothing this year," Nathan said to him. "Not even gleanings, for the grain was but little advanced."

"You have had the land," Sivaji said, "for which you have contracted to pay so much money, so much. These are just dues, I must have them. Would you have me return empty handed?"

athan's shoulders sagged. He looked tired and dispirited and stood beside him. Ira and the boys crouched behind us, defensively.

"There is nothing," Nathan repeated. "Do you not see the crops are dead? There has been no rain and the river is dry."

"Yet such was the contract else the land would not have been rented to you."

"What would you have me do? The last harvest was gone; we have nothing saved."

Sivaji looked away. "I do not know. It is your contract. I must do as I am bid."

"What then?"

"The land is to be given to another if you cannot make a profit."

"Go from the land after all these years? Where would we go? How would we live?"

"It is your concern. I have my orders and must obey them."

Nathan stood there sweating and trembling.

"Give me time," he said at last humbly, "until the next year. I will pay then, somehow."

"Pay half now," Sivaji said, "and I will try and do as you wish." He spoke quickly, as if to give himself no time to repent of his offer, and hurried away even before my father had assented.

"No easy job for him," I said. "He is answerable, even we are."

"That is why he and his kind are employed," Nathan said bitterly. "To protect their overlords from such unpleasant tasks. Now the landlord can wring from us his money and care not for the misery he evokes, for indeed it would be difficult for any man to see another starve and his wife and children as well; or to enjoy the profits born of such travail."

He went into the hut and I followed. A few mud pots and two brass vessels, the tin trunk I had

"It is for you to make the offer."

"Tell me first how much you want and I will see what I do."

"Enough to pay the land dues."

"How much is that?"

"It is my business."

He was silent for a while, and I said to him exasperated, "Tell me if you are not prepared to buy and I will go elsewhere."

"Always in haste," he rebuked me in that gentle, oily voice of his. "Yet I think this time you will have to wait my pleasure, Rukmani."

"What do you mean?" I said, ruffled. "There are many who would be pleased to buy such good material."

"I think not," he said. "I think not. For, you see, the offers of other men have come to me, even as you have, and have gone away as you threaten, yet they have to come back to me because nobody else can afford to buy in these hard times."

"As no doubt you can," I said with contempt, and then inspiration came to me and I went on: "Unless you offer a fair price I shall take these saris elsewhere. There is the Muslim wife of a tannery official whom I know, and she will buy from me as she has done before."

"Indeed," he said, a little disconcerted. "Well, Rukmani, since we have done business for a long time, and because you are a woman of spirit whom I have long admired, I will give you thirty rupees. Nobody could be fairer."

"Fairer by far," I retorted. "I will not take one pie under seventy-five rupees. Take it or not as you please."

I put the clothes away, making a pretence of going to the door. I hoped he would call me back, for in truth I did not know where else to turn, but if not—well, thirty rupees was too far from our needs to be of use, and if I did not get what I asked I might as well keep the saris.

"Let us only try," I said with the sobs coming fast. Let us keep our hope for a next harvest."

"Very well, very well," Nathan exclaimed "Let us try all means. We may be kicked for our pains, but what of that! Anything to stop your wailing. Now go, do not cross me further."

"He is worried," I thought, smothering my sobs. "He is distracted and does not mean to be harsh."

I went inside and lay down, with the money tied to my body, and at last dozed off into a troubled sleep.

In the morning Sivaji came, and my husband took the money and counted it out in front of him.

"One hundred and twenty-five rupees," he said "Not all what we owe, but the best we can do without selling the seed for the next sowing."

"It would raise only a few rupees" I pleaded. "Let us keep it, and we will repay you twofold."

"It is not for me," Sivaji answered "You make payment to another. What shall I say to him that I bring him little? You made promise of half."

"Give us a little grace," Nathan said, dragging the words. "We will make full repayment and over after the next harvesting."

So we stood and argued and begged, and in the end Sivaji agreed to wait. He took the money and turned to go, then he hesitated and said, a little wistfully.

"What I do I must, for I must think of my own. . . I do not wish to be hard. May you prosper."

"May you prosper too," I whispered, hardly able to speak, for his words had left me defenceless. "May the Gods give you their blessing." And so he departed.

The drought continued until we lost count of the time. Day after day the pitiless sun blazed down scorching whatever still remained on the earth hard until

of water, lizards and squirrels lay prone and blistering sunlight.

In the town a water reservoir had been built for tannery workers and their families, but now others allowed a limited quantity as well. So thither I journeyed every morning, and, when I said how many we were, perhaps half a mud-pot would be doled out, sometimes a little depending upon who was in charge. Then some women in their greed began to claim to have more children than they had, and non-existent relatives, and then jealousies and spite and bitter argument. Until at last it was decreed that each person must come in his own turn only, not for others, even children and old men, and then an

man

I and our hopes had shrivelled with the paddy — to do any good — then we saw the storm clouds gather and before long the rain came lashing down, making fury for the long drought and giving the grateful life as much as it could suck and more. But in us there was nothing left — no joy, no call for joy. It had come to

CHAPTER XIV

soon as the rains were over, and the cracks in the earth had healed, and the land was moist and ready, took our seed to our Goddess and placed it at her feet to receive her blessing, and then we bore it away and made sowing

Then a few weeks had gone by, the seed sprouted; her shoots appeared, thrusting upwards with increasing length, and soon we were able to transplant the seedlings by one, and at first they stood out singly, slender, gullionous spires with spaces between: but grew and grew, soon were merged into one thick green field of rustling rye. In that field, in the grain which had not yet begun to form, lay our future and our hope

hope, and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear; fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of winter; fear of the blackness of death.

Long before the paddy ripened we came to the end of our red-fish stocks. There was no money left—every pie had gone to pay the land dues. Nothing left to sell. Nothing to be had from my efforts, for the vines and vegetables had withered in the long weeks of drought.

At last no option but to draw upon my secret hoard: a small stock of rice, ten ollocks in all, shielded from every temptation to sell or barter, kept even when the need to feed our land had squeezed us dry of everything else. Now I brought it out and measured it again, ten ollocks exactly. Then I divided it into several equal portions, each of the portions as little as would suffice for one day, and counted

the portions of which there were twenty-four, so that nearly a month we would not starve. For a long time I hesitated, wondering whether we could do with less, in making thirty divisions, but finally, I decided against it. Kutí was already ailing, and we needed to preserve strength for the harvest.

'For at least twenty-four days we shall eat,' I thought. 'At the end of that time — well, we are in God's hands. He will not fail us.' Sometimes I thought that, and other times I was seized with trembling and was frightened, not knowing where to turn.

The nights were always the worst, and not for me alone. Peace then seemed to forsake our hut and I could hear my husband and children moving restlessly in their beds and muttering, whether from hunger or fear I do not know. Once Nathan cried out loudly and sprang up in his bed. I went to him, and he woke then and clung to me.

"Only a dream," I said. "Sleep, my dear one."

"A nightmare," he said sweating. "I saw the paddy turned to straw, the grain lost . . . Oh God, all was lost!"

His voice was stark, bereft of the power of dissimulation which full consciousness brings.

"Never fear," I said with false courage lest panic should swoop down on us. "All will be well."

He composed himself for sleep again.

"You are a good wife," he murmured. "I would not have any other."

I drifted at last into uneasy sleep, and dreamt of evil dreams, and in one I saw a shadowy figure with a pale face creeping into our hut and bearing away the ten *okas* of rice. I knew it was but the result of an over-burdened spirit, but the following night I had the same dream. As the days passed I found myself growing increasingly suspicious. Except for my family, I trusted no one. Only on the night when there were no passers-by, did I feel completely safe. Then I would bring out the rice, and measure it and run the grain through my fingers for sheer love of fondling it like a simpleton. When I had taken out

otted portion for the next day I would bury the remainder, one half, tied in a white cloth, in a hole I dug at a distance from our hut, the other half in our granary. Several times I thought of going to Kenny, and twice I did go. He would have helped us, of that I am sure, each time I was told he had gone away—the townfolk did not see him for many weeks. I would have gone again and again, but I had not my full strength; it was no longer easy to walk to the town and back. We might have borrowed from Biswas, but there was nothing left to pledge; in any event, we would not have been able even to pay the interest he demanded.

Seven days went by and seven precious portions of rice were eaten. On the eighth day Kunthi came as I was stirring the rice-water.

I had not set eyes on her for a considerable time—since the day I had seen her in her nakedness, and she had changed so much I scarcely recognised her. I gazed at her hardly believing. The skin of her face was stiff and dry as if from overstretching, elsewhere it showed folds; her breasts hung loose; what had been her pride and beauty was now not a vestige remained.

'Well,' I thought. 'All women come to it sooner or later—she has come off perhaps worse than most.'

"Sit and rest awhile," I said. "What brings you hither?" She made no answer, but walked to the pot on the fire and looked in.

"You eat well," she said. "Better than most."

"Not well. We eat, that is all."

"You still have your husband?"

"Why, yes," I said staring at her, not quite taking her meaning. "Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "I have lost mine. I wondered how you had fared."

'Poor thing,' I thought. 'She has suffered'—I looked at her pityingly.

"I do not want your pity," she said savagely, "my husband. He is alive and well—he is another."

I thought of her husband, slow, sturdy, dependable, red like an ox, and I could not believe it of him; then I thought of Kunthi as I had once seen her, with painted mouth and scented thighs that had held so many men, and I worked it out after all these years he had not at last found out about her. Perhaps the truth has been forced upon him, I thought, looking at her with suspicion, and I gazed upon that ravaged beauty.

"Stare your fill," she said scornfully. "You lack lashed graces, Rukmani."

I averted my eyes hastily. I hardly knew what to

"I have come," she continued, "not to be seen, or to see you, but for a meal. I have not eaten for a long time."

I went to the pot and stirred it, scooped out a portion and placed it in a bowl, handed it to her. She swallowed it quickly and put the bowl down.

"I must have some rice too. I cannot come every day...as it is I have waited a long time to make sure you are alone."

"There is no rice to be given away," I said. "I think of my husband and children. These are not of plenty."

"Nevertheless," she replied, "I will have some. My damage will never be repaired whilst I hunger. Take no life for me until I am whole again."

"She is mad," I thought. "She believes what she says. She does not realise there is no going back for her."

"Listen," I said, "there is none, or very little. Do not ask for our rice-water, come here daily, but do not ask for more. I have a daughter and sons, even as you have, to care for. What I have belongs to us all. Can you not go to your sons?"

"My sons," she said, looking at me speculatively, "not mine alone." Seeing my bewilderment she added, "I have wives. I would never approach them now."

What are sons for——" I began.

Not to beg from," she interrupted with a flicker of tempt. "I can look after myself; but first the bloom must come back."

She was mute: I had said all there was to say and now there was nothing more.

"Well," she said, breaking the silence, and with an edge in her voice. "How much longer have I to wait?"

She came close to me and put her face near mine. I saw the grey, drawn flesh and the hooded eyes, deep sunken in their sockets, and I made to turn away but she held me. "I have not so much patience," she said. "I will have to know now or your husband shall hear that his wife is not as virtuous as he believes—or she pretends"

"He believes what is true," I said with anger. "I do not pretend"

"Perhaps he has not seen what I have seen," she said, and there was menace in her voice and threat in the words. "The hums and goings in the twilight, and soft speech, and the milk and honey such as men make to the women—they have known"

"Stop," I howled at her, and put my hands to my ears. Lights kept hurtling through my head like frenzied wheels in a new-forged cage. With sudden clarity I remembered my daughter's looks that far-off day when I had gone to Kenny, my son's words, such men have power, especially over women; remembered my own foolish silences. I closed my eyes and sank down. She came and sat by me.

"Which is it to be? Which is it to be?..."

Her words were hammering at my brain, the horrible images were beating the air around me, the whole place was full of their sound.

"I need you," I cried to myself, "Nathan, my husband. I cannot take the risk, because there is a risk since she is clever and I am not. In your anger or your jealousy, or even because you are not yourself after these long strained months, you may believe what she says and what she means. Because I have deceived you and cannot deny all"

"I do not want your pity," she said savagely, my husband. He is alive and well—he is living another."

I thought of her husband, slow, sturdy, dependable, like an ox, and I could not believe it of him; then I of Kunthi as I had once seen her, with painted-scented thighs that had held so many men, and I if after all these years he had not at last found out her. 'Perhaps the truth has been forced upon' thought, looking at her with suspicion, and I gazed upon that ravaged beauty.

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"I must have some rice too. I cannot come even...as it is I have waited a long time to make sure you alone."

"There is no rice to be given away," I said. "I think of my husband and children. These are not of plenty."

"Nevertheless," she replied, "I will have some. damage will never be repaired whilst I hunger. This is life for me until I am whole again."

'She is mad,' I thought. 'She believes what she does not realise there is no going back for her.'

"Listen," I said, "there is none, or very little. Do our rice-water, come here daily, but do not ask for I have a daughter and sons, even as you have, to console. What I have belongs to us all. Can you not go to your sons?"

"My sons," she said, looking at me speculatively, "not mine alone." Seeing my bewilderment she added, "I have wives. I would never approach them now."

isting aside the small core of suspicion each time it
ned. 'Surely not. Who else? Who?'

long time passed; when at last I rose, my limbs were
and prickling, and darkness had given way to the first
beginnings of dawn.

Nathan was not in the hut when I went back: I saw
sitting beside the paddy fields as he often did when
could not sleep. The boys were still asleep, the two
ones side by side, Kuti squeezed close to Ira and she
her arm thrown across him. I shook her by the
elder, and Kuti woke first and began to cry. I picked
up and took him outside and left him there, and when
ent back the others were awake. I looked at the three
and I thought bitterly. 'One of them has done this
me... Which one? Which one?' I thought, ques-
ing, looking at the three faces as if to read their thoughts;
there was nothing to see save alarm, they shrank a
from my vehemence.

"I must know," I shouted. "I must know who has done
this thing."

They looked at me as if I had lost my senses. Ira said
fly, "We would not take what belonged to us all."

"Tell me I am imagining the loss," I stormed at her,
that I myself have eaten it."

They stared at me in silence, amazed. Outside Kuti was
ling. Attracted by his cries, Nathan had come up, now
called to me.

"See to the child," he said frowning. "Can you not
him? He will choke."

"So much the better," I said. "It will be one mouth less
feed."

"You are ill," he said. "You do not know what you
saying." He picked up the child, soothing him in his
arms, and then gave him to Ira.

"My heart is sick," I said. "I have been robbed,
one of my own children, of rice, which above all is
most precious."

"Is that what... said to them?"

I nodded I saw his face wither.

"I took it," he said at last.

"You? My husband? I do not believe it!"

"It is true"

Silence fell like a shroud I listened to it locked: own brooding bitterness Then it was rent by a so raw, so painful, that my nerves began screaming in re I looked up and it was Nathan His face was w from his throat came those dry hideous sobs

"Not for myself," he was muttering, trying to cor treacherous voice, "for another I took it for z There was no other way I hoped you would not I had to do it"

I went to him I did not want to know any mo he had done it or for whom, it was no longer imp but he was still speaking it was as if he could not s

"Kunthi took it all, I swear it She forced me, I want you to know"

Presently he was quiet

"She has a strange power, this woman," I said, myself

"Not strange," Nathan said "I am the father ons She would have told you, and I was weak"

Disbelief first, disillusionment, anger, reproach, to find out, after so many years, in such a cruel Calh's words she has fire in her body, men burn nd after My husband was of those men He had k er not once but twice, he had gone back to give t econd son 'And between, how many times,' I tho eak of spirit, 'while her husband in his impotent in my innocence did nothing'

"It was a long time ago," Nathan said. "I was ous, and she a skilful woman"

"The first time was before our marriage," he said,

"One did not see the evil for the beauty," he said

At last I made an effort and roused myself.

"It is as you say a long time ago," I said wearily. "p he is evil and powerful I know myself. Let it rest"

as far as possible for me to speak as well. I told him of my further visit and the grain she had extorted from me. And it seemed to me that a new peace came to us, freed at last from the necessity for lies and concealment and deceit, with the fear of betrayal lifted from us, with the power we ourselves had given her wrested from Kunthi.

And that the last of the rice was gone it was in a sense itself : no amount of scheming and paring would make it any further : the last grain had been eaten.

Hereafter we fed on whatever we could find : the soft fruit of the prickly pear, a sweet potato or two, rotten and half-rotten, thrown away by some more prosperous hand ; sometimes a crab that Nathan managed to catch near the river. Early and late my sons roamed the countryside, returning with a few bamboo shoots, a stick of cane left in some deserted field, or a piece of coconut shed from the gutter in the town. For these they must be ranged widely, for other farmers and their families, like plough to ourselves, were also out searching for food ; and for every edible plant or root there was a struggle — a desperate competition that made enemies of friends and : an end to humanity.

It was not enough. Sometimes from sheer rebellion we ate grass, although it always resulted in stomach cramps and violent retching. For hunger is a curious thing : at first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is a gnawing and a pain as if your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment's respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you and because you know this you try to avoid the thought that you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, all pain, all desire, only a great emptiness is left, like the sky like a well in drought, and it is now that the strength drain

from your limbs, and you try to rise and find ; or to swallow water and your throat is powerless, and the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid to the uttermost.

'It will not be long before the harvest,' Nathan murmur, and I would agree with him, stifling the whether our strength would last till then, saying, 'A not long now ; only a little time before the grain :

It happened to me too, but I could not see myself what happened to others : saw their flesh melt away their skin sag and sink between their jutting bones their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs cut from under the skin ; and what withered the your doubly hard on the old and they were emaciated twice

But of us all Kutu suffered the most. He had never a healthy child ; now he was constantly ailing. At asked for rice-water and cried because there was no later he gave up asking and merely cried. Even sleep he whimpered, twisting and turning endlessly, tiring no one to rest. Ira was gentlest with him, and the patient, nursing him in her skinny arms and giving him of what came to her, but more often than not he away, unable to take the rough food we offered, and she would hold him against her and give him her and he would pull at the parched teat and be soothed for a while his thin wailing would die away

CHAPTER XV

ONE day Raja went out as usual and did not come back. At dusk they brought his body home slung
There
h, fresh
its head.

ir heads
muzzled their feet and spoke in low voices and then they
went away. It was real, yet it seemed a nightmare, it
could not be true that my son lay dead before me. Thus
my thoughts, dazed and confused, injecting pain where there
was numbness; and my mind, furtively touching the edges
of realisation, then fleeing from it in terror.

He had been caught, they said, something about money.
What had my son to do with money, who had not a pie
ey told me. They

As if I did not
But why should
me, but the sense
at I could not re-

member. They repeated themselves again and again, but I
kept forgetting. I heard Ira begin to sing a low dirge, she
was rocking gently back and forth, and she was crying.

"What are you crying for?" I said. "You have little
enough strength, without dissolving it in tears."

She looked at me stupidly, and away, and down at her
mother. Her sorrow flowed to me, the numbness began to
fear. I tried frantically to keep it—I might as well have
tried to imprison a cloud.

For this I have given you birth, my son, that you should
lie in the end at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness
in your limbs and yourself departed without giving
this huddle of bones and flesh without

business to be, and when the chowkidars caught him they found he had stolen a calf-skin."

"I do not believe it," I said. "What use had he for such thing?"

"Not in itself maybe," he replied in a strained voice, as if struggling to keep his temper, "but of course he could have sold it—sold it anywhere. We have had a lot of sales recently."

"You cannot blame my son," I said wearily. "We live from hand to mouth, as you can see...there is no wealth here, such as your goods might have brought."

"I am not blaming your son alone," he said carefully, "but of course it is well known your sons have been trouble-makers. Now we do not want any trouble from you, you understand. The lad was caught in the act of stealing—maybe, as you say, for the first time and in a moment of weakness—still, he was caught, and for the consequences it followed, no one was to blame except himself. He could not have struggled. In these circumstances you naturally have no claim on us."

"Claim?" I said. "I have made no claim. I do not understand you."

He made a gesture of impatience.

"You may think of it later, and try to get compensation. I warn you, it will not work."

"Compensation," I thought. "What compensation is there for death?" I felt confused, I did not understand what he was getting at. There was a pause. The timid man said kindly:

"He was not brutally treated or anything, you know. They merely tapped him with a lathi, as he was trying to escape, and he fell. He must have been very weak or something."

"He was," I said. "He worked hard, and ate little." "Naturally, it must have been a blow for you," said the timid one. "It is hard to lose—that is——" He tailed off, but his companion's glance fixed on him.

CHAPTER XVI

"THERE is the reaping," I said, "and the threshing and winnowing. How shall we manage when the time comes?"

"When the time comes," Nathan said with a gleam in his eye, "the strength will be forthcoming, never fear."

I looked at him doubtfully thin and drawn, with thighs and arms so puny that no muscle showed even when he flexed them. The rice would have to be lifted plant by plant, and the grain separated from the husk, and the husk eaten for the last few grains. It meant working long hours in the flooded fields with bent back, and much labouring in greater converting the paddy into rice. It was no task for weakened bodies.

"You will see," he said with confidence. "We will find strength. One look at the swelling grain will be enough to renew our vigour."

Indeed, it did our hearts good to see the paddy ripen. I watched it as a dog watches a bone, jealously, lest it be snatched away, or as a mother her child, with pride and affection. And most of all with fear.

As we sat there Irawaddy came to us, stepping softly. "It is hot within," she said forlornly. "I could not rest." She went and picked a head of paddy before sitting down beside us. I saw her fingers parting the husk, feeling for the grain within.

"How much longer?"

The same question, the answer to which she already knew, so had lived on the land since birth.

"Three weeks," Nathan's reply, grave, sincere, absolutely honest where another might have been tempted to easier words.

"It is not long to wait," I said, trying to hearten her, "and if the Gods are kind it may even be sooner."

Through relief and exhaustion I slept well that night, aking refreshed before daybreak with a renewed hope-ness. 'Soon all will be well,' I thought. 'We shall eat and the strength will come back to us, and there will be no more fear. This has been a bad time but it is passing as all things must, and now it is not joy, which passes in a moment, but sorrow, which is slower in the going, and so one must be patient. A few more days' waiting, a few more days' anxiety—it is not beyond enduring, it is not too much to ask.' This I thought as I lay there, listening to the sounds of sleep and lost in my own imaginings.

The darkness was lifting when I heard the sound of footsteps, wary, soft, less heard than felt as a slight tremor in the ground. If it had been a reverberating gong, that sound could not have had more violent effect. My fancies went headlong from me; in their place a cloud of black and grey arose, revolving before my eyes and assuming fantastic shapes and forms until at last one stood out clearly away from the swirling mists and with a face to it. In this. No one but Kunthi, coming stealthily by night to take from us what little we had, unashamed as she was and always had been.

The footsteps were coming nearer. I raised myself on my elbow the better to listen, trying to still the thudding of my ear-drums which impeded my hearing. Nearer and nearer. I stood up, bracing myself for the encounter, and stepped from the familiar darkness of the hut into the grey night outside. The figure was there, soft and blurred in outline, but a woman's. I threw myself at it, pinioning its arms savagely, thrust at it and beat it to the ground; I lay on it with fury; felt the weak struggles of the body beneath mine like the feeble fluttering of a trapped bird, and exulted. The air was full of harsh sounds, but whether they issued from my throat or hers, or existed only in my imagination, I do not know. The being that was me was no longer in possession—it had been consumed in the flames of anger and hatred that raged through me in those few minutes; what took its place I do not know.

Then I heard a thin, shrill scream "Mother! Mother!" Hands were dragging me away. I felt myself pulled and thrown to one side "Fiend! Madwoman!" Nathan was shrieking. "Accursed mother!" He was bending over the form, doing something to it. I saw he was quite naked and wondered at it, forgetting he had come straight from the bath. He turned to me

"Are you out of your mind? Your own daughter, you have killed her Murderess!"

He and Selvam carried her in. I slunk after them, not believing. It could not be Irawaddy. It was some monstrous mistake they had made, not I. I crept to her side and saw it was Irawaddy. Her face was puffed and bore horrible marks, one lip was bleeding where her tooth had bitten down. I closed my eyes. Red circles opened out before them, leading into an endless blackness. I shook myself clear and went to aid my husband. He had a pot of water and was wiping the blood from her body. His shirt was stained with blood. I took the cloth from him.

"I will see to her."

He thrust me aside. "Get away; you have done enough harm. You are not fit."

"I thought it was Kunthu," I whispered.

He moved a little, making room for me, but remained near, not wholly trusting.

She had been badly cut. A long jagged gash showed in her left side, there was a similar one on her left wrist.

"These wounds," I said. "I did not make them." He did not expect him to believe me.

"I know. The bangles broke."

Bangles? How could she have bangles, who had not a piece of her own? I stared at him, not knowing amid the unreal happenings whether those were his words or what I had heard. He pointed.

"Do you not see the glass—there and there. She was wearing bangles."

They had broken against her body, which had protected her from injury. I began to swab. The cuts were full of glass, some of it in splinters, some of it in powder like fine sand. When I had cleaned them I bound the two largest gashes. For the rest there was nothing I could use, as these were smaller and mercifully soon stopped bleeding. The sari I had taken from her was soaked with blood and sticky where dust clung to the wet cloth. I took it down to the river intending to wash it, shook it clear of dust and broken glass. As I did so, something dropped from the folds, fell in the muddy water, sank, and was lost, but not before I had seen that it was a rupee.

I went on with my work, scrubbing the blood-stains, rinsing the cloth, laying it on the grass to dry. Then I came back, swept and cleaned the hut, cleared the courtyard, removed all signs of the struggle that had been. The sun was moving to midday by the time I had finished. Now that there was nothing more to do, the thoughts I had so far avoided came crowding in on me in agitated turmoil. Who had given her the money? Why? Had she stolen it, and if so how and who from? Why did she have to walk by night wearing glass bangles? I kept very quiet, not to waken my sleeping daughter, while the thoughts went galloping through my head, and question after question, unanswered.

Kuti, lying in a corner of the hut, began to moan. Ira stirred and opened her eyes, gesturing vaguely towards him and went to her first.

"Lie still; the cuts will open again."

She looked at me sombrely.

"Feed him; he is hungry. Take the rupee you will find my sari."

I knew then that it was she who had been responsible for the improvement in Kuti, not my prayers.

Nathan was about to say something, to question her perhaps. I gripped his arm, forcing him to silence. Ira was struggling to rise. I went to her.

Ira gave me a sidelong glance :

"Your imagination would not travel that far"

"You do not know me," I said, troubled "And I no
ger understand you."

"The truth is unpalatable," she replied

pondered awhile, searching my memory : then it came
me - the man who had called after Raja's death. He
said the same thing. The truth is unpalatable

Nathan came in from the fields at sundown as Ira was
ing forth. He had been clearing the irrigation chan-
and strengthening the dams, the fork he carried was
ed with soil and water. He thrust it into the earth and
sed on it.

"Where do you go at this hour ?"

"It is better not to speak"

"I will have an answer."

"I can give you none"

Nathan's brows drew together, she had never before
den to him in this manner. Looking at her, it seemed
me that almost over-night she had changed ; she had
a tender and modest and obedient, now she had re-
quished every one of these qualities ; it was difficult to
eve she had ever been their possessor.

Nathan was groping for words, stumbling a little over
m.

"I will not have it said — I will not have you parading
night —"

"Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there
need. I will not hunger any more."

"Like a harlot," he said "A common strumpet."

The veins in his forehead were standing out, on each
ple a pulse throbbed fiercely. Ira stood defiant before

n, uttering no denial, fingers plucking at the fringe of her

n. I closed my eyes, I could not bear to see them thus.

"These are but words," she said at last. "There are

ers, kinder ones, . . . for decency's sake —"

"Decency !" he "Do not speak of . . ."

She was quiet for a moment, and he said with delicacy,

"No man will look at you, defaced as you are."

"The cuts will heal," she retorted. "Men do not my face."

I think he laid a restraining hand on her: for I heard her say, "Let me pass," and there was a slight rustle as she withdrew from his grasp.

Well, we let her go. We had tried everything in our power, there was nothing more we could do. She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission; but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination. We had for so long accepted her obedience to our will that when it ceased to be given naturally, it came as a considerable shock; yet there was no option but to accept the change, strange and bewailing as it was, for obedience cannot be extorted. It was as simple as that: we forbade, she insisted, we lost. We got used to her comings and goings, as we had got used to so much else.

With her earnings Irawaddy was able to buy rice salt, and milk for the child, who was too weak for any else. After the roots and leavings we had existed on was grateful enough for the food, but of what she brought Nathan would not touch a morsel. Day after day he lay out as before, delving and scraping for food, as thin and dry as a hollow bamboo stick.

"What is done is done," I said, urging him to eat. "There is no stricture on you, for you have tried."

"I will not touch it," he said, eyeing me steadily. The bitterness was behind this I do not know, or what condemnation of his powerlessness to feed his children: this I do know: his spirit was very strong, and he was an upright man.

For the first few days after Ira resumed feeding with milk, he seemed to grow better, but the improvement — if improvement it had been: I do not know, for he ceased to cry and we took this for improvement — did

continue. Soon it became clear that he was sinking. His eyes grew larger in his pinched face, there was a brightness in their soft brown as if all that was left of life was concentrated there; and indeed they seemed to be the only active part of him. From his corner, when he was no longer capable of any other movement, his eyes constantly followed us, seeming never to tire in their restless wandering. Otherwise he lay quiet like a bruised fledgling, with the dry, parched lips of exhaustion and a body which could struggle no more.

Only once I heard him call — a slight whisper that barely reached me.

"Ama?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I cannot see you — I cannot see anything"

"I am here my son, very near you"

There was a feeble movement of his arms, and I knelt beside him and clasped them round my neck, holding them there, for he was too weak

"Sleep, dearest. Soon you will be better, and then you will be able to see again. I promise you, you will see again"

He seemed content; he accepted the lies I told him and rested a little — perhaps in relief, for who knows what fears troubled his child's mind? Soon I felt him relax and resting his hands gently drew away from him. A little later I heard a slight sound and turning saw that he had closed his eyes and was gazing at Ira, staring at her unflinching. I went to him and saw that his eyes were sightless; already a thin film was overspreading them. I picked him up and held him to me, his limp, emaciated body, slight I might have been holding a handful of leaves, not a child, sagged lifeless against mine. I crooned to him, regretting he was dead, until the cold came creeping through his limbs and he began to stiffen; then at last I laid him down, closing his eyes and pushing back the fronds of hair that clung damply to his brow. He looked tired but

at

face and bitter eyes Our last child, conceived in happiness at a time when the river of our lives ran gently, had been taken from us ; I knew too well what he felt Yet, although I grieved, it was not for my son ; for in my heart I could not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to continue it.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Kutu was gone—with a bland indifference that mocked our loss—the abundant grain grew ripe. It was the second crop of the year, sown on ground which had not been allowed to lie fallow, and so we did not think it would be other than meagre; but contrary to our expectations it was a very good harvest. Every husk was filled, the paddy stood firm and healthy, showing no breaks in their ranks. We worked through the days and in the twilight sitting in the rice, and then we worked three more days draining the fields and clearing them, and then three more nights sifting and winnowing. Even so, a heap of unhusked paddy lay in our granary, waiting until the marketing should be done.

"It is as I said," Nathan exclaimed. "Strength has been given to us. Else how could so much have been achieved by such as we are?" He looked round triumphantly, pointing to the neat white hills of rice and the husks in a stinging, brown heap. We looked at each other, streaked with sweat, thin and bony like scarecrows and as ugly, and suddenly what he had said seemed very funny; and first Iyam and then Ira began to laugh, helpless, speechless, with tears running down their cheeks, until we older people slowly joined them—could not help but join in their laughter—and the spectre of what had been tweaked at our memories in vain. There we were, the four of us, hysterical, pleased, rocking with laughter and gasping for breath which ran out as fast as we sucked it in. The hollow cheeks and bulging eyes were a matter of course. It was a matter of course for laughter to find its way to the throat.

A some measure born of relief that we could do so Nathan especially was in exuberant mood. He kept

CHAPTER XVIII

WENT to market laden with smooth-skinned brinjals and pumpkins, round and fleshed like young women the earth had yielded richly: there were, besides, beans and potatoes, melons and chillies, and I was well pleased with them and with the silver coins I had received in exchange. I no longer sold to Biswas, there were several other shops in the town now where I was paid better, and where I did not have to endure the sly, spiteful observations he made. Increasing years had added more grease to his bulk, more flesh to his paunch; they had not sweetened his nature or endowed him with more kindness, confounding the curses that came his way — and there were many, for his usury was harsh beyond necessity — he continued to prosper, squeezing the life from those hapless creatures who were driven to borrow from him, and gaining strength from their weakness.

Seeing me pass, he came and stood in his doorway and led.

'Rukmani! I have news for you. Stop a minute!'

'What is it?'

'Kenny is back. I have seen him.'

'So,' I said warily 'That is good news for everybody.'

'Especially for you,' he said, keeping his eye on me.

'For everybody,' I repeated, 'for he is a good doctor. Many people are in his debt.'

'He is also a man,' he said. 'They say he is a good friend to you.'

'To me and mine,' I said with rising temper. 'He has done much for us.'

'For you particularly,' he insisted, his flabby lips twitching with innuendo. 'I have heard from Ku . . . {
's is so'

"A whore's tale," I said contemptuously, "as suspect her body."

He thrust his face up to mine

"Yet not for that reason dismissed," he said, leering.

I wanted to strike him, I wanted to ram his words into his throat. I held myself still with an effort.

"Foul-mouthed pig!" I said. "Carion crow!"

He only smiled, being used to harsh words.

"As hot-headed as ever, Rukmani," he said. "Will you turn when next you need money?"

He was so slippery, so worthless, that my anger did not even the malignant power of Kunthu could rouse. I felt too remote.

I hung about for a while, unable to make up my mind whether to try and seek him in the town, or whether to go home in prudence and await his coming, as I felt he would. Then it struck me as ludicrous that at this

I should walk with caution, and I went therefore to the white-washed cottage on the fringes of the town, early in the morning, carrying a garland of roses and jasmine to welcome him, and a lime for good luck.

The cottage was bare—it always had been—and dead and lifeless from long disuse. Dust lay thick on the floor. There were neat hillocks of chipped cement and earth where bandicoots, for some obscure reason of their own, had come. So much I saw from the broken front window, that I pushed open the door to enter.

Kenny was standing in the smaller room that led off the main one. He turned when he heard me come in, and looked at me frown.

"How did you know I was here?"

Accustomed though I was to him, the brusque words, in a short manner, dashed the welcome from my lips.

"Biswas told me," I said. "I came at once."

There was a silence. The garland I was holding was an encumbrance, I felt I had been stupid to buy it, the lime seemed unnecessary. I tried to hide them behind my back. He noticed at once.

"What have you got there?"

"A few things—I have just been to market," I began.

"A garland, is it not?"

"Yes," I said sheepishly "I bought it for you. You will like it."

He drew me to the window and pointed. Outside lay a heap of garlands, roses, lilies, chrysanthemums; evidently others had been before me.

"Not a guess," he said gravely, "a certainty. You were the first."

"Well-intentioned for all that——" I was beginning hotly when he began to laugh, grinning widely so that the lines of his face were somehow lost in the creases of laughter, making him look young and amiable. I felt better at once; my strangeness vanished.

"You have been away a long time," I said. "Too long; I have missed you."

"Why?" he said. "More trouble?"

"Yes," I said, and looked covertly at him. "I have been away for years."

"Yet"

It was not only on that account we missed you. I stopped, not knowing how to finish. He would have helped us in our need with food and money and skill, but it was something more than this that he offered us, and I could not find words for it.

"Your presence," I said haltingly, "means a lot to us. There is a rare gentleness in you, the sweeter for its brief appearances."

I do not know what emboldened me—perhaps it was his silence. He seemed to be hardly listening. He was still standing, looking out of the window, biting his nails.

"Troubles," he said. "We all have them. I suppose the crops failed and you starved."

"It was a bad time," I answered him. "We ;

sons. Raja died by an accident. The child was too for this world; he could not live as we did. After crops failed he ——" I stopped again. The memory of the days was ever with me, yet the passing of time had left it quiescent; now my own words brought it savagely back with a shrill, stabbing pain that swept the words away. I was quiet for a while, waiting for it to fade, to regain calmness. He did not look round, perhaps he sensed my struggle.

"Enough of me," I said at last. "What of you? Yours?"

He turned on me roughly. "What concern is that yours?"

"None; save that I wish them well."

"Save your wishes," he said unpleasantly. "My wife has left me. My sons have been taught to forget me."

I tried and failed to imagine her, this woman who after so many years renounce altogether her husband, break the bond that must surely have existed despite his long absences. 'Perhaps it is just this that has driven him to this,' I thought. 'He is not without blame.'

"You think it is my fault," he said. "Do not deceive your face speaks plainly enough for me."

"Women need men," I said, shrugging. "It is not fair to deprive a woman."

"Tell me also," he said. "Do you not think a man should choose his work?"

"Such a man as you, yes," I replied.

"What then if his wife cannot accompany him?"

"Cannot?" I said. "She must. A woman's place is with her husband."

He sighed impatiently. "You simplify everything, but without understanding. Your views are so limited it is impossible to explain to you."

"Limited, yes," I agree. "Yet not wholly without understanding. Our ways are not your ways."

"You have sound instincts," he said.

For the first time since I had known him I saw a gleam of admiration in his eyes.

"I am not a fool," I said, speaking in a low voice, pleased the commendation in his eyes, a little hurt by it as well. Have I not so much sense to see that you are not one of us? You live and work here, and there is in your heart solicitude for us and love for our children. But this is not your country and we are not your people. If you lived here your whole life it still would not be."

"My country," he said. "Sometimes I do not know which is my country. Until today I had thought perhaps it is this."

He sounded bitter and weary. His forlorn spirit touched me, and a great emptiness seemed to unfold in me. I wished I could have my words back, locked away safely in myself, unsaid, powerless to wound.

"Save your regrets," he said. "You have told me nothing I did not know."

"I will go. My husband and children will be happy to see you. We shall be glad to welcome you in our house."

"You are not without riches, as I have said before," he said, speaking half to himself. "How is your daughter? Was she a pretty young woman?"

"Well; she is carrying."

"So her coming to me was not in vain?"

"Had she been barren for ever, it would have been better."

"Why? Was it not your wish—?"

"Not this way," I said, "with the father any one of a dozen men."

"I suppose it was necessary," he said quietly. "I have known it happen before."

"She would go," I replied. "She was devoted to the child; she would go. But of course she knew nothing. Being inexperienced in such matters, and now she is with child. She conceived quickly."

"You will feel better when it is born," he said. "A child is no worse for being conceived in an encounter."

"You may be right," I said bitterly, "but you do not share the shame of it. People have not spared us."

He stared at me impatiently.

"That is all you can think of: what people will
One goes from one end of the world to the other to
the same story Does it matter what people say?"
tone was contemptuous. 'Well,' I thought. 'It is ex
you, but perhaps not quite so simple for us.'

I walked home, musing over what he had said
presently it seemed to me there was truth in his
and I felt a little comforted. Nathan had said the
same thing: he and Kenny, so different in other ways
yet united in their views about this.

CHAPTER XIX

KENNY'S return was the beginning of another change in our lives, and in Selvam's. Selvam, who for all that had been reared on the land and had the earth in his blood, yet did not take to farming. Like his brothers, he was hard-working and conscientious, but he had no love for it and in return it did not yield to him. He had a knowledge of crops and seasons, born of experience, but here crops thrived under Nathan's hand, under his they withered. Despite anxious care, the seed he planted did not sprout, the plants that sprouted did not bear.

One day he came straight from working in the fields, threw down the spade he was carrying and announced he was done with the land.

"I am no farmer," he said, "The land has no liking for me, and I have no time for it."

"What then will you do, my son?" I said, worried. "How will you live when we are gone?"

He did not reply at once, but sat down cross-legged, looking out absently beyond the small courtyard to the cool green of the paddy fields. But he was not thinking of them.

"Kenny is building a hospital," he said. "When it is ready he will need an assistant, and he has offered me the job."

"But what can you know of such work?"

"Nothing. He is going to train me, starting as soon as possible. He says it will not be too difficult for me, for I am not without learning."

It was true. Selvam had been cast in the same mould as his brothers. He had quickly learned what I had to teach and had progressed from there by his own efforts and enthusiasm. Study came to him naturally; he wrote and read as I had once done, avidly, with pleasure. 'He w

learn,' I thought. 'This is the chance he has been waiting for.'

Selvam began to fidget.

"I have told my father," he said hesitantly. "He is willing."

I smiled at him. "So am I. I wish you well."

He relaxed. "I am glad. I thought you might be were — displeased."

"Not displeased. Perhaps disappointed, since all our have forsaken the land. But it is the best way for you."

"It is the best way," he repeated after me. "It will be a great venture. We have many plans and much hope."

We both relapsed into silence. I watched him wondering whether I should say, 'You must be prepared that his new association will not be taken at face value, there will be vilifiers who will say it was done not for you or your mother, who will seek to destroy your peace'; then I thought resolutely, 'I will not take the fire from

live or sow suspicion between them,' and so I held my peace. But his steady eyes were on me, calm and level.

"I am not unaware," he said quietly. "But is it sufficient that you have the strength and I have trust?"

"It is indeed," I said with relief. "I wanted only that you should know."

We smiled at each other in perfect understanding.

I sought out Kenny again.

"We are once more in your debt. My son is overjoyed that it is something he has waited for without knowing it."

"I am indebted to him as well. I need an assistant; promises to be a good one and will I hope be the first many. I could not carry on alone. The town has grown and is still growing, as you know."

"It will be bigger than what went before?"

"It will be a hospital, not a dispensary," he said coldly. "Let me show you."

He pulled out several papers, drawings and long sheets covered with calculations which I could not understand and

hen he explained them though this I did not confess. I
 ftered only that it would be a big affair.

"Where is the money to come from?" I said bewildered.
 Such a construction will need I do not know how many
 indreds of rupees."

"I have thousands" he replied

"I did not realise. You have lived like us, the poor"

"The money is not mine. It has been given to me -- I
 ve collected it while I have been away"

"In your country?" I said. "From your people?"

"Yes," he said impatiently. "Part of it came from my
 ntry and my people, part of it from yours. Why do
 h look puzzled?"

"I have little --" he said humbly. "I do
 us and who know

"because they have the means," he said, "and because
 y have learnt of your need. Do not the sick die in the
 ets because there is no hospital for them? Are not
 dren born in the gutters? I have told you before," he
 i. "I will repeat it again; you must cry out if you want
 p. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will
 our the drowning man if he does not clamour for his
 ?"

It is said --" I began

"Never mind what is said or what you have been told.
 re is no grandeur in want -- or in endurance."

privately I thought, "Well, and what if we gave in to
 troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures
 ed to be so weak, for is not a man's spirit given to him
 ise above his misfortunes? As for our wants, they are
 ry and unfilled, for who is so rich or compassionate as
 supply them? Want is our companion from birth to
 th, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in
 ee. What profit to bewail that which has always been
 cannot change?"

is eyes narrowed: whether from our long
 rom many dealings w beings, and

learn,' I thought. 'This is the chance he has been for.'

Selvam began to fidget.

"I have told my father," he said hesitantly. "He willing"

I smiled at him. "So am I. I wish you well."

He relaxed. "I am glad. I thought you might were — displeased"

"Not displeased. Perhaps disappointed, since all have forsaken the land. But it is the best way for you."

"It is the best way," he repeated after me. "It a great venture. We have many plans and much hope."

We both relapsed into silence. I watched him, wondering whether I should say, 'You must be prepared. This new association will not be taken at face value. There will be visitors who will say it was done not for you, but for your mother, who will seek to destroy your peace.'

I thought resolutely, 'I will not take the first step. I will live or sow suspicion between them,' and so I said nothing. But his steady eyes were on me, calm and level. "I am not unaware," he said quietly. "But is sufficient that you have the strength and I have trust."

"It is indeed," I said with relief. "I wanted to tell you should know."

We smiled at each other in perfect understanding. I sought out Kenny again.

"We are once more in your debt. My son is overjoyed. It is something he has waited for without knowing it."

"I am indebted to him as well. I need an assistant. I promise to be a good one and will I hope be the first of many. I could not carry on alone. The town has grown and is still growing, as you know."

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He pulled out several papers, drawings and long sheets covered with calculations which I could not understand.

CHAPTER XX

Not in the town, where all that was natural had long been sacrificed, but on its outskirts, one could still see the passing of the seasons. For in the town there were the crowds, and streets battened down upon the earth, and the path that men had put upon it, and one walked with care for what might lie beneath one's feet or threaten from before or behind; and in this preoccupation forgot to look at the sun or the stars, or even to observe they had changed their clothing in the sky: and knew nothing of the passage of time save in dry frenzy, by looking at a clock. But for us, who lived by the green, quiet fields, perilously close though these were to the town, nature still gave its muted message. Each passing day, each week, each month, left its sign, clear and unmistakable.

The tender budding of our new year, the periwinkles and the jasmine, the soft, scented champak blossom, had yielded place to the fierce flowering jacaranda and gold mohur, before it's time came for giving birth. When my daughter was in labour I erected the bamboo paling outside to warn my husband and son, as is the custom for those who have only one room and one dwelling, and when I had scoured the street and poured wet dung on it I brought out the pallet of dried straw I myself had used, for Ira to lie on; and when I had gathered the petals the trees had shaken about them, I took them into her, a vivid basket of layer upon layer of gold and red and mauve and purple.

"A child of summer," I said, "should be sturdy."

She smiled and laid her hands on the petals.

"He is. I feel it."

While I waited I thought of the other births this very year I had seen. First Ira herself, then the long, long interval and after that almost every passing year I bore a son. There had been hope and expectation, perhaps some anxiety, before

each birth; they were natural feelings. But now fears came swarming about my head like the black flying ants after a storm, and I cowered from the beat of their wings. A child conceived in an encounter fares no worse than a child born in wedlock... so Kenny had said; but could one be sure? A man takes his wife with passion, as is his nature, yet he is gentle with her: amid the fire of breast on breast and bared thigh on thigh he still can hold himself, and give as much as he takes, leaving the exultant flesh unbruised. A woman is his, his wife, not only now for this surging experience, but tomorrow and next year. She will carry his seed, and he will see her fruitful, watch while day by day his child grows within her. And so he is tender and careful, and comes to her clean that their fulfilment may be rich and blessed.

But the man who finds a woman in the street, raises his eyebrow and snaps his fingers so that she follows him, tosses her a few coins that he may possess her, holds her under whatever he does to her, for this is what he has.

—what cares such a man for the woman who is but a brief moment? He has gained his relief, she her pay, and she merges carelessly into the human throng, consigning herself back into the shadows where she worked or to the streets where she loitered.

Of the thousands of men in the village, in the town, perhaps another village, another town, one man unknown is the father: of the vast range of manhood, who is to blame he was not of the unsound, the unclean? What can be the safeguard is there when the consequences of one's act are hidden from one's thankful eyes, and the woman is often many, soft, desired, lost, forgotten!

If Ira had any fears she did not show them: perhaps she had fought her battles out alone when I was not there to see and when her face could not betray her; or perhaps her love for children swamped every other feeling. It was meant to have children: I had always known that. It was a cruel twist of Fate that gave them to her this way.

Then at last the birth began, and while I was minister-

her all these thoughts coiled back into my brain, leaving by the present and the immediate future which every being second converted instantly into the past. Then there is no past or future, only now, the present, as I received the child and held him, while the fears that were nameless descended on me and shrieked their message and were no more nameless. I held him, this child begotten in the street by an unknown man in a moment of easy desire, while the brightness of the future broke and fell about me like so many pieces of coloured glass.

I did not want his mother to see: I washed him slowly, and massaged oil into his body, hoping to mitigate the whiteness of it, hoping to give colour to his skin, while he lay lustily, for he was a healthy child; and finally his mother called for him. I swaddled him carefully before I gave him to her hoping — still hoping — that she would not notice

"Your son," I said, handing her the bundle, hovering in my anxiety. She took it, smiling and relaxed.

"A lovely child," she said, gazing at the small face fondly, "fair as a blossom."

Fair! He was too fair. Only his mother failed to see how unnatural his fairness was, or to notice that the hair which grew slow and unwilling from his pate was the colour of moonlight, or that his eyes were pink. Sometimes I wondered whether her mind was gone, since she could not see what

was the most beautiful baby any woman could have. It was to her. Such heaviness of spirit as there was, pressed not on her but on us, her parents, and of us Nathan was the most burdened.

"She has lost her reason," he said. "She does not see her child as he is, as she would have him be."

Nathan's voice reached me from a distance :

"What is the matter with you? Are you not fair well?"

"I am all right I was thinking."

"Give it a rest," he said "Give it a rest."

I was relieved that Kali, most garrulous of women, had not come, but it was a short-lived relief. She had been suffering from one of her periodic attacks of ague, and soon as she had got rid of it she came, waddling, for she had put on a lot of fat when prosperity had returned to the land.

"I would have come before," she puffed, "but for ague. The shivering was bad this year and the fever. I tell you, I hardly know how I survived." She lowered her voice confidentially. "You know how it is — not too good at my age."

"I hope you are better," I said.

"Ah well, one must not expect too much. I am better. But I did not come to talk about myself."

I looked at her without favour — it was plain enough she had come. She lowered her voice again.

"Is it true about the baby? People say he is milk white."

"He is fair," agreed Ira equably. "See for yourself" and she held out the sleeping child in her arms. Kali stepped forward eagerly, quivering in her excitement, and at that moment as ill luck would have it the child woke, eyes wide open. His weak, pinkish eyes, yawned and began to yell piercingly. Kali stepped back as if she had been deliberately affronted, and with such pity as she might have had in her perished.

"He looks peculiar," she said frankly. "Not a bit normal. Who ever heard of pink eyes in a human child?"

I did not know what to say. Nathan was looking at her sourly: he had never liked her. Ira's face was strained and taut and queerly defensive, as if she had been told something and was wondering where the next blow would fall. 'She does know,' I thought with something akin to relief, 'yet of course not wholly so.' She hides her knowledge well. The silence went on, everybody afraid to speak, there-

crossing in the over-full air, eyes averted, shifting
ered at last to the ground. Then I heard Selvam clearing
throat to speak, and at once heads turned, surprised
tened of suspense, very much alert.

"Just a matter of colouring," he said, "or lack of it. It
only a question of getting used to. Who is to say this
our is right and that is not?"

The words of a boy — Selvam was not sixteen — shaming
all.

"But pink ——" Kali began

"A pink-eyed child is no worse than a brown-eyed one,"
said, looking at her with cold, rebuking eyes. "I should
e thought your instincts as a woman if nothing else
uld have told you that"

He turned away from her contemptuously and began
king his fingers to the child. Sacrabani, who had been
aming vigorously, began to quieten down: he gave one
two more tentative wails, then his mouth split in some-
ng like a smile and his fingers curled round Selvam's.

Selvam turned and smiled at us, raising eloquent eye-
ws: Was not the child exactly the same as other babies?
d he not said so?

Triumphantly he turned to look for Kali but she —
noticed — had gone

CHAPTER XXI

FROM the day construction began on the hospital, ceased to belong to us. During the preparations, while site was bought and cleared, and a contractor engaged to find men and material, he spent his time with Kenny, and what they discussed I do not know, but sometimes he was home elated and sometimes he was morose and dejected and it was clear enough that the many delays they countered irked his spirit beyond the telling. Then when construction actually started, the bricks stacked high, cement in heaps, whatever time he could spare he spent the site watching while brick was laid on brick and mortar flowed between : and occasionally when the labourers killed (which was not often, for they were a jealous crew), would take a hand in the building himself, for nothing gave him more pleasure than that. What he did not know was that seven more tedious years were to pass before the hospital was complete : both he and Kenny, possessed by the same enthusiasm, had, I think, reckoned on a much shorter time. May be it was as well they did not know : for seven years is a long time to be patient.

If things had gone as they had hoped, the hospital would have been completed within a year, and Old Granny would not have had to die in the street as she did. There was nowhere else she could go : she had lived in the street and she died there. Day by day she sat beside her torn gipsy sack selling handfuls of nuts and berries, growing progressively older, more ragged, less healthy. She had no relatives left—no person on whom she had any claim—certainly there was no one to enquire whether she made a living, how much longer she could continue to do so. Better to avoid such questions, better to pass quickly by with a cheerful word, than to stop and ask, for who would lightly take on the burden of feeding another mouth? And so one

le quietly disappeared. They found her body on the path at led to the well, an empty mud-pot beside her and the innysacking tied around her waist. She had died of starvation.

Once a human being is dead there are people enough to provide the last decencies; perhaps it is so because only then can there be no question of further or recurring assistance being sought. Death after all is final. I could not avoid the thought, which came from my own uneasy conscience, harsh and bitter, as I watched them lift her up, light dust, on to the bier; as mourners came with flowers, as sandal and camphor were laid unstinted on the pyre, as rose-scent and sandalwood paste were sprinkled on her corpse.

Granny,
a man
when
sure

Old Granny's death bore especially hard on me for apart from the fact that we had been friends since my marriage I could not forgive myself for having accepted the rupee which might have fed her for several days. I wanted to throw it away—give it to the next old crone I saw—anything to gain my relief; but the money belonged to Sacrabani, to me.

"You are being very childish," Nathan said. "How long would a rupee have kept her?"

"A few days at least," I said.

"And what when those few days ran out?"

"I don't know something may have turned up. It is only the hospital was not ready. She could have gone there."

"A hospital is not a soup kitchen," he said.

I did not know what he meant by a soup kitchen and I asked him. He repeated the words, pleased that he was understood and I did not.

"Where the poor are fed free of charge," he explained. "In other countries. Selvam tells me this is a fact."

"And how should he know? He has not been in this town since his birth?"

"From books he has read perhaps—or Kenny may told him. I do not know *how* he knows."

"Well, anyway," I said, going back to what we had discussing, "soup kitchen or not, they would not have an old ailing woman."

"Why go on about it?" he said exasperated. "You only distressing yourself and it might never have been tell you a hospital is only for the sick. There is none for the old."

The hospital was no more than a few months old, a few feet high when people began attempting to stake claims. They went to Kenny and they came to Selvam; they even approached me, his mother, and from the who came I soon knew that not one-tenth could enter what I of little perception knew Kenny and Selvam two-fold—but we none of us said anything, for woven about us a net of silence in whose meshes were seriously held our fears and our misgivings.

Meanwhile, work on the hospital did not progress at all; twice the contractor was changed, and each man appointed new foremen, and these brought their own men. One year there were not enough men; the next enough material. During one very hot summer the men's huts caught fire and before it could be put out it spread to the timber stacked nearby. The loss had not made good, as had also the theft, despite the presence of a chowkidar, of a cartload of bricks and the cart itself. So times work stopped altogether, for what reasons I do not know, while Kenny and Selvam strode about the desolate site in exasperation, dark as thunder, unapproachable. Selvam made frequent trips away from the town from which he came back tired and often dispirited; but always work resumed on his return.

"Every pie has to be fought for," Selvam said. "It is not be easy."

"He told me he had enough," I said. "He was away long time collecting the money."

"There can never be enough," Selvam said, turning away. "It is not as to myself. 'It bare your woes

and catalogue your needs, people have only to close their eyes and their ears, you cannot force them to see and to hear—or to answer your cries if they cannot and will not." Once I dared to say as much to Kenny and he looked at me little sadly and said there were other ways which he could explain to me. There was much talk between him and me but I do not rate building at least it did

on

Before long Selvam began his training. The small white-washed cottage was once again in use, with my son now assisting Kenny. By the second year of his training he began treating minor cases by himself, and from then onwards Kenny paid him a small wage, not regularly but as and when funds came his way. Once in a moment of thoughtlessness I asked how he would contrive to pay all staff when the hospital was finally established, for it was certain many people would be needed to run it. His face darkened: he would, he said, find ways and means. It became his most frequent saying.

CHAPTER XXII

SELVAM and Ira had always been close, the year separation when my daughter went to her husband had affected their relationship not at all, she treated him as if he were her son than her brother, and he in turn accorded her love and returned it in his own deep, quiet way understood her well, better than I did who was her mother. In fact, I wonder whether parents ever know their child as they know one another. At any rate in our family

were better read, more learned, than we were: but since the troubles at the tannery in which her sons became involved, and for other reasons, she had been prejudiced against any kind of learning. In her view most troubles in the country sprang from the pages of books. Selvam's easy attitude towards her son brought Ira nearer to him. From the beginning Selvam had accepted the child's albinism: accepted it and thought no more. From infancy he treated Sacrabani exactly as if he were a normal child. The pity of it was that it was a lost battle. No amount of such action on his part or ours could bring others to the same persuasion. Sacrabani was isolated from the start, a white crow in a flock of black, a grain of wheat among the rice. By the time he was four, Sacrabani was used to being a hanger-on—forever on the fringe of others' activities. Because of his difference, the other children never included him as a matter of course in their games; they were short of a player, or for some other good reason they sometimes invited him to join them, but on no account was he to do so of his own accord. In the hope of thus asked he had to tag along, patient and submissive. Physical disabilities alone would have ensured his

le; for his skin was unable to stand the sun, and the light affected his eyes. The sight of him crouched in the shade, his reddened face and streaming eyes evoked from his companions not pity but ribaldry. Poor child, he had even to fear the behaviour of his elders, who stared—those who had not seen him before—and nudged each other and whispered and rustled, while those who *had* vied with each other to be the first to enlighten them. Then one day, sprung from who knows what taunts flung at him, his questionings, of many, began.

"Mother, what is a bastard?"

"What does one say to a child? What possible answer there? I saw Ira eyeing the boy, startled, wary, trying to guess how much innocence and how much knowledge behind the question, wondering how little and how much he could tell him, questioning in her turn to gain time

"Why do you ask?"

"I want to know"

"It is a child whose birth his mother did not wish for"

"Oh," he said, looking at her speculatively. "Did you want me to be born?"

"Yes, of course, darling," Ira cried, and all the guilt of her efforts to have an abortion was in her voice. "I would not lose you for anything. Why do you have to ask?"

"I wanted to know," he repeated lightly, noncommittally, not knowing how cruelly he had hurt his mother.

Some days later he tackled her again

"Mother, have I got a father?"

"Yes, dear, of course."

"Where is he?"

"Not here, my son; he is away"

"Why does he never come to see us?"

"He will when he can."

"But why not now?"

"Because he cannot. You will understand when you are older."

"How old?"

"I do not know myself. Now run away and play must not ask so many questions."

The first lie; many to follow. The distressing, inescapable need for lying.

"I would have told him his father was dead," I said "as he certainly is to all intents and purposes. It would have been easier."

"Do not interfere," Nathan said "It is for Ira to decide."

Ira looked heavy-eyed and hurt. "Yes; you are right," she said "I should have told him that. I was not prepared for the question—he is such a baby still"

"He did not think of it himself," I said. "He is as too young. No doubt one of his companions."

"Leave it, leave it," said Nathan "Do not upset the girl any more."

He put out his hand to Ira, but she shied away from it. I saw her leave the hut.

"It is no use going to her," Nathan said sadly. "She

must as there is to be had must come from her."

Nevertheless, after a little while he did go to her. His gentleness melted her last remnants of control, for she began to weep. I heard her crying for a long time.

CHAPTER XXIII

My third son, Murugan, who was a servant, married a girl from the town in which he worked. We had not seen her, nor did we know her family, and the marriage, the second year after Sacrabani's birth, was solemnised at her parents' house without either of us being present. Had it been at all possible we would have gone, but it proved beyond our power. The town was over a hundred miles away, and since the harvest had been a poor one and Selvam was earning very little we had not the money to go by rail. Murugan, it is true, had a bullock in addition to his milch cows, and a cart which he offered to lend us for a small sum. Nathan was not fit enough to undertake the journey there and back. He was nearing fifty and no longer as healthy as he had been. He had begun to suffer from rheumatism, and apart from this had had several attacks of fever, from one of which he recovered more slowly and emerged weaker. Sometimes in the middle of sowing or reaping or tilling, or innumerable tasks the land demanded, he would stop and straighten up, breathing hard and trembling. Often he was unable to continue work and was forced to lie down in the hut for a while. Ira and I did what we could, but the work is mistress to man, not to woman. The heavy work needed is beyond her strength. Several times Kenny came to see him bringing food and sometimes medicine; he told me bluntly that my husband was not getting enough to eat. "We eat well enough when the harvest is good," I answered him, "but of course we have our lean times." "Too many," he said. "Your husband needs milk and vegetables and butter, not plain rice day after day." I looked at him incredulously. "Those can only come our way when the yield is rich," I said. "It cannot be so ways or indeed even frequent, for we are not rich, you understand."

and his peace with you. We would not have had it
wise."

"Yet in your hearts you may have wished for something

"If so, we have long since forgotten it. We would
wish for our son other than what he would wish for
self. He has chosen well."

"Another silence

"Do you never," he said, "think of your future? While
still have your strength and can plan?"

"Naturally we think. But plan? How can we? It
is not within our means."

"Is there nothing you can do?" he asked. "Nothing
at all?"

"What can we do? There are many like ourselves
who cannot provide for the future. You know it your-

self; I know... I do not know why I asked; it was
foolish. There is no provision at all," he said, speak-
ing half to himself, "neither for old nor young nor sick
to accept it; they have no option."

"He looked so stern that I grew alarmed

"Do not concern yourself," I said diffidently. "We
are in God's hands."

"He looked up sharply, abruptly as if some chain of
thought had been rudely broken. Then he left me

"Nathan was lying within. "What happened?" he
asked, turning to face me. "You were a long time."

"We were talking, that is all."

"What about?"

"You are as persistent as your grandson," I said, "but
being older you should know better. We were talking
about Selvam. Kenny thinks he will be good. He is
growing well."

"I am glad. Tell me, did he not say anything about
the future?"

"Only that you were not to worry and then
it would be all right."



one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. We live by our labours from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children, and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and in fact, too, is within our experience. In our lives there is no margin for misfortune.

Still, while there was land there was hope. Nothing now, nothing whatever. My being was full of the husks of despair, dry, lifeless. I went into the hut and looked about. Brown mud walls that had crumbled many a time and

his own hands in the time he was waiting for me brought me to it with a pride which I, used to better living and so very nearly crushed. In it we had lain together, and our children had been born. This hut with all its memories is to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. And the land itself by which we lived. It is a cruel thing, I thought. They do not know what they do to us.

When Selvam came home that night from his studies my husband broke the news to him. I do not know what he expected—indignation, anger, perhaps sorrow—but he betrayed no emotion. He put the books he was carrying in the wooden crate he had made, then he sat down, still musing his own counsel; the wavering light from the wick on its saucer of oil fell on his face, sombre and serious as always was in repose. 'Well,' I thought. 'This cannot

in the brooding silence again, and I thought. 'Naturally he is impatient in his good cause'

did not. I closed my eyes and felt his hands on my temples where the pulses beat, gently stroking, soothing me the only way he could. He suffered for me, not so much for himself, and I likewise, so that although together there was more strength there was also more suffering, and each had been alone the way might not have seemed so hard, yet I knew neither could have borne it alone. Thus confused, my mind turned this way and that, like a paper boat dipping to every current of air, unsure of its own meanings.

At length in the midst of the blackness I heard Selvam speaking and I opened my eyes. He seemed to be struggling with himself, for the words did not come easily and his fierce inner battle he waged had brought the sweat out on his forehead and left his lips dry. He was addressing his father alone—"No doubt he dismisses me as an hysterical man," I thought. "He is not far wrong."

"I can always return to the land," he was saying. "I am young and able-bodied. Together we can rent another piece of land. Live as we did."

I saw my husband's eyes kindle, I saw in them, fearfully, a light of hope. "You should not have said it," I cried anxiously to my son. "It is too difficult for him, cruelly difficult." But already Nathan was shaking his head.

"No, my son. I would not have it so." He spoke absolutely. "There are some things that cannot be refused. Besides I would never be happy. Certainly my mother would not let me rest," he added, smiling a little.

"No; we must go. Ira and Sacrabani must come with us of course; there is nothing for them here."

"I will stay," said Ira, whom we had supposed asleep. And she rose and came and knelt beside her father. "I will not be a burden to you. I am happy enough here. My people are used to me and my son. I cannot start a new life now."

"If I can," said Nathan, "whose youth is only a

mory now, why should not you, n
young ; it will not be difficult for :

"I must think of my son," she

"How will you eat?" I said

"If she decides to stay," said S
me. I will look after her. I swe

"And the child?"

"And the child, of course."

"Is it possible?" Nathan aske
you have for yourself"

"Do I not know it?" said Selva
petual shame to me that I have n
rents. Yet I promise they shall not

If it had not been so late at nigh
tired and dispirited — we might h
partly for her sake and partly for
we said no more — not that night

subsequently we had more discussions

only that we were to go
and grandchild were to stay

CHAPTER XXIV

took down the mats on which we slept from the wall where they hung and rolled them up. Inside I tied the cloth bundle which contained two ollocks of rice, chillies, tamarind and salt, and the two wooden bowls, Han's and mine, tying the ends of the rolled mats to be sure nothing fell out on the way. Most of the cooking vessels I had brought with me on my marriage had been sold to pay our debts, of the remainder I left for Ira and the other two I put aside for ourselves. A grindstone, pestle and mortar were too heavy to take, my case my daughter-in-law would be providing these 'when cooking days are over,' I thought a little sadly, and sadly what I had formerly performed without thought, even with impatience—the gathering of fuel, and the kindling of the fire, and the waxing of the flames under the steaming pot, with all the business of smoke down the throat and in the eyes—acquired a sweet and piercing piquancy. There would be meals to cook on the journey, ever, since we were travelling by bullock-cart and expected to be on the road at least two days, and for these I took the hand-made bellows and six cakes of dung. Under the granary floor our money lay buried—three rupees of our own, three that Selvam had given us out of his savings, and a ten rupee note that Kenny had sent through the postman. When everything was done I took out the money, counted it and tucked it in securely at my waist. Then we were ready.

The morning of our departure comes. It is a still morning, dewy for it is yet early. The bullock-cart lurches, the bells around the animals' necks jangling, they have bells fixed to caps on the tips of their horns too, which clatter as they move. The cart is piled high with bales of tightly-packed skins, for we are passengers on a

journey, but there is room enough for two. We of Selvam hands us the two or three bundles we are us which we hold on our laps until the carter tells us stow them on top of the bales. We do so, carefully

Then it is time to go. Selvam steps back. Ira comes ward from the courtyard where she has been standing, is holding her son by the hand. The three of them stand line waiting to see us on our way. The carter flicks bullocks with his whip, the animals strain forward, the gives a lurch. Nathan holds out his hands, our child bow their heads. Then we begin to move and the three them come after us a little of the way, walking in the the wheels grind out of the earth, until the bullocks beg trot and they fall back. The bullocks have found their rhythm now, moving so that their hoofs strike the earth together and the yoke is borne steadily on their shoulders: are travelling fast. The hut — its inhabitants — recedes hind us and yet in front of us, for we are sitting with backs to the bullocks. Our beloved green fields fall and *a blur, the hut becomes a smudge on the horizon.* We strain our eyes to pierce the reddish dust the wheels throw up. We are farther away with every turn of the wheel stare at them fascinated until the spokes begin to recede backwards while the rim is inexorably borne forward. I'm dizzy, my throat is dry. I lean against my husband, he already leaning on me, together we achieve a kind of comfort.

The carter is asleep on his jointed perch: the bullocks know the route well, they keep on without guidance from him. At midday we halt near a small wayside well. The carter awakens, snorts, stretches himself before climbing down. We are to eat here, he says, and he unyokes the bullocks and waters them. I see one of them has a large raw patch on his shoulder where the yoke has rubbed the skin off.

"The animal is not well," I say to the man.

He shrugs: "What can I do? I have no other. I must make these trips since they are my livelihood."

We wash, eat, wash again, then proceed.

file after mile of dusty road stretching out straight before lined here and there with cool shady banyans or tamar-trees. The bullock with the sore patch is slowing the r up; the carter turns impatient and brings out his p. It is no use, its pace does not alter. We pass other ock-carts, are passed by some, eat again, sleep again. At it we stop while the carter lights the lantern slung be-h the cart, then we move on in the darkness and the ll yellow light-disc travels with us like a comforting on. On and on, and on and on, we journey.

he cart driver roused us when we reached the outskirts he city where my son worked. It was mid-afternoon, sun was streaming down hot and at its most powerful.

Here you are. 'This is as far as I can take you.' He ed Nathan, who sat with his head lolling against the s, fast asleep. I shook him, pushing his head erect. 'Wake up, we have arrived.'

e opened his eyes, reddened and with drooping lids. 'I could easily sleep the whole day through,' he said, ung and stretching.

'We are late already,' the carter was grumbling. 'I ld have got here by morning if only this bullock had better pace——'

e leaped down and lifted the yoke preparatory to water-is animals. The raw patch on the bullock I had noticed e had begun to fester, more skin had been eaten away trickles of blood were running down the edges.

This animal will soon be fit for nothing,' he muttered himself. 'Heaven knows when I shall be able to afford her.'

s soon as the animals had drunk he put the yoke back. bullock cringed, but accepted the torment and as soon e whip fell it began to pull again.

he carter leaned from his perch to call to us, his face and perspiring. 'Good luck friends, keep well!' His e was friendly.

Goodbye, go.

For a little while we stood by the roadside, cur about us. There were three turnings before us and was no telling which way lay the house of our son Nathan picked up the mats

"Come along We may meet somebody soon."

We chose a road at random, walked for some time out seeing anyone. 'We should have asked the cart thought. 'He would have known'; but did not say so. length we saw two men approaching, jogging along towards us with bundles on their heads.

"Can you direct us to Koil Street, friend?"

"Koil Street? Let me see," he put up his hand to his head, but, the burden being there, withdrew it.

"No, I do not Brother, can you tell these people they want to know?"

His companion thought. "I have heard of it. I remember now, it is in one of the suburbs of the town. A way from here, but this is the right road."

"How far?"

"About fifteen miles. If you keep to the road you get a lift," he added good-naturedly, seeing our necessities.

We plodded on. Several bullock-carts passed us and two jutkas, but none stopped. Most of them were laden already. The bundle I carried, for all that it cost a little, grew heavier with each step, my neck was aching with the effort of holding my head steady, for the bundle was poised on top. Under each arm was a cooking pot. Whenever the sweat came trickling down—which happened frequently, it was a hot day—I had to stop and put the pot down before wiping my face. My husband, similarly beset, and troubled more than I was by flies and insects, had to stop frequently, so our going was slow.

As we progressed the road broadened; it split and other roads curled away from it and more came to it, so that it was difficult to know whether we were on the right road or not. Many people were about, very quickly and intent on their business: we did not find

easy to stop and ask them the way. Not only people but traffic—bullock-carts, jutkas, cars and bicycles, more than we had ever seen, many times thicker than in the town round the tannery. The noise never let up—car horns, produce is impossible to produce, we were bells we

did not hear. Once a jutka almost ran us over—the driver just managed to pull up the horse and while we stood palpitating he leaned from his seat, irate and frightened, to shout at us. His voice was very loud, and he shook his head as he drove off. Several people stopped to stare at us anxiously as we hurried on.

We had reached the city's centre, Koil Street lay some miles away, and we were still not sure of finding it. I could see Nathan was very tired—the heat and the noise, the bustle of the city, had taken their toll. He was walking feebly, now and again he stumbled, and at last I said, "Let us rest for a while, it will do us both good."

He agreed at once, we found a quieter side street, and thankfully putting our burdens beside us sank down. No one paid any attention to us. We were allowed to sit there in peace. We had bought on the way a hand of plantains, which four remained, and as we had not eaten since morning I brought these out, giving two to my husband and eating two myself. It was nearly dusk—the activities of the city were beginning to die down, the noise was decreasing. Soon street lights were winking and in the shops gas lamps and hurricane lanterns were lighting up, but in the little side alley where we sat it was dark—darker than the street and the sky above us from the shadows cast by the buildings on either side.

It was such a relief to rest, and the thought of continuing the search was so unwelcome, that we sat on while the gloom thickened and night crept up on us. When at last we rose, stars were bright in the sky. "We have stayed too long," I thought uneasily. "We shall not reach our son tonight."

In the precincts of the temple, shops and stalls were open, brightly lit with gas lamps with their owners standing or ~~ling~~ within and calling out their wares to passers-by; it most had no money to spend. At one shop pilaus were ~~ling~~ sold, mounds of saffron rice on buttered plantain ~~aves~~, glistening with ghee and garnished with red chillies and curling strips of fried onion. The smell from it, rich and tempting, swirled up with the puffs of steam from the ~~ling~~ rice. Impossible to shut it out, useless to try the ~~grant~~ smell was everywhere. I felt a cramp beginning in my stomach, held it with an effort that turned me giddy; when it had passed, the familiar symptoms of nausea began. ~~than~~ pressed my arm in sympathy; he too looked queasy.

and along the corridors we
whom this was evidently a
vaulted chamber with arched
es. Here we stopped and
down to wait with the rest on the stone floor. On the
inner chamber the God and Goddess were seated on
thrones, freshly anointed and garlanded with flowers.
their feet were piled betel-leaves, rice and a host of
meats.

A woman sitting beside me nudged and pointed.
"The food is given to the poor—to us—when it has
been blessed. There is a lot tonight," she added. "You
are lucky!" I saw her sucking her lips in anticipation.
After a while two priests with half-shaven heads entered.
One carried a beakerful of water, the other a tray of more
divine offerings, which they placed at the feet of the God.
Gongs began to tinkle; at their sound the priests began in-
voking the prayers, one taking up where the other left off.
Everyone was standing, most of them with hands folded and
closed eyes. I closed my eyes, too, pressing my hands over
my eyes. The eye-balls felt hot under the lids. I could see
beneath them a black-rimmed orange glow against which
flashed the images of the past—my sons, Ira, the hut where
I lived and the fields we had worked. The more I banished
from the forefront of my mind, I saw Old Granny again.

portions.' Then I saw two men enter bringing the food and all other thought ceased. Craning my neck and body, standing on tiptoe, I saw the cauldrons they carried, cauldrons of rice heaped high and showing white gleaming peaks from which wisps of steam issued, and pots filled with a mixture of dhal and vegetables which sent forth a most savoury smell.

From a pile beside him one of the men took out a plantain leaf—not a whole one, but cut into pieces twice the size

ly by going close to the vessels that I could see any rice at all. One of the men rebuked me sharply.

"Keep your distance. Do you want to devour pot and leaf?"

"I must ask for my husband," I thought, and found myself taking. The plantain leaf was handed to me, the rice placed on top, then the cup of dhal. Now.

"If you would be so kind, sir," I said, "I will take my husband's portion as well on my leaf."

They gaped at me, surprised, affronted.

"The woman is mad," one called out. "Expects a double portion."

"Not satisfied with one," the other rejoined in an offensive voice, "but must try and make capital out of charity."

"I do not," I said. "I have a husband and he is here, ask only for his portion."

"If he is here let him come and we will serve him in his turn. We cannot hand out food to everyone merely because they ask for it. Do you take us for fools? Keep your tales from the unwary!" cried one, and the other called out impatiently:

Three or four had seen us searching, three or four more
had these, soon a small crowd of advisers and helpers
flowed at our heels

"Are you sure it was this Hall of Pillars? There is an-
ner on the West side of the temple."

"Quite sure. We have not been on the other side"

"How could they?" said a scornful voice. "That side
locked at night."

"Who was looking after the bundles?"

"No one, no one . . . we left them untended."

"Untended! Looking for trouble that was! There are
ny thieves and strangers about these days"

"What, even in a temple! We did not think —"

"Yes, even in a temple, of course. Many kinds come
e, there can be no guarantee of their honesty"

"It appears not," Nathan said heavily "Our possessions
e gone"

There was futility only in further searching, further wear-
i. We gave up and leant our backs against the painted
l which encircled the temple, the vermilion and white
ed wall we had foolishly thought meant safety. The
mise of shelter had been kept however: food, and some-
re to sleep

"At least the loss is not irreparable," Nathan said "We
e our money still, the pots and matting can be replaced"

"Best not to speak of it," I said, feeling cautiously for
money in my waistband, the coins hard and comforting
my touch "We must be careful"

He smiled wryly "After the horse has bolted?"

But I could not smile, and the ease with which he ac-

"Now I shall be wholly
thought. 'I go to her
beggar off the streets;'

straightway I determined to spend one or two of the
bs I felt digging into my flesh at the nearest bazaar, for
would not go to her destitute. Soothed a little by the
ought I drifted into sleep, broken often by bells ringing
d the low rat-tat of drums for the prayers which

on at intervals throughout the night. Once in my hall it seemed to me someone was tugging at my arm, but I woke it was only Nathan clutching at me in his sleep. I dozed off again, and after a while I felt a soft fumble about my face, noiseless, like fingers on spindle cotton. I strove to wake, to brush aside those pathetic flutterings, but as I would I could not at last I sat up, sleep and dream alike banished, wide awake now. And whether from the fact of sleeping in new surroundings, or from the fatigue we had sustained, I was unable to sleep again.

I leant against that same wall by which we had laid ourselves down, watching the wind play with the yellow flag on top of the temple, looking into the darkness which ran its pitch from point to point. Gradually I was able to make out the forms of the carved Gods and Goddesses on the walls of the temple, on the colonnades, and in the niches of the walls, and as I gazed they seemed almost to live, their breasts gently breathing, their limbs lightly moving. Not nearly could I believe what I saw, sitting there in the darkness by the temple wall. Until dawn, when the stars fell

one by one, and the grey light changed the statues and figures back into immobility.

CHAPTER XXV

I always Nathan stirred with the first light, when he saw I was awake he sat up quickly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"You slept well," I said, a little envious because I had yet glad since he looked so much better for it.

"Yes, I was tired. But you look as if you had been up tight."

"Almost. I could not sleep."

"You were worried no doubt," he said gravely, and the firm in his voice made me slightly ashamed of myself. "I, we shall soon be with our son and you will be able to sit. Come, we may as well start now — the sooner the better."

I went to wash at the tap, threading our way among heaps of rags under which men and women lay huddled in sleep, their crutches or staffs and begging bowls at their feet, and when we had done we went out the way we had come in.

Early though it was, many of the shops were open. From food stalls came the spluttering of ghee and oil as bread and pancakes were fried, ready for the early worshippers who would soon be coming. As we passed, Nathan hesitated. I saw him eyeing the crisp golden pancakes laid out on a platter.

"Let us buy a few," he said cheerfully. "I am hungry and you must be too."

For my part hesitated, although the food was tempting and, for the silver coins we had were few and precious there was no telling what our needs might be; still I could not very well deny him when I had already made up my mind to spend some of the money on cooking vessels, so I put my hand in my waistband to take out the money I had tied there.

made off, his head down and his shoulders moving as he ran. We stood and looked at the house, arrived but uncertain how to proceed, and it looked back at us neither inviting nor forbidding. There was a wooden paling around it, broken by a small wooden gate, and at length — there being nobody in sight to ask — we walked through to the garden and so to the house. The doors and windows in it were wide open as if the occupant needed all the fresh air there was, and we could see right to the back of the house where two or three men were sitting wearing the white tunics of servants, and one of them at length saw us and came forward, saying mechanically as if he had used the same words many times before, "Beggars are not allowed here, only those who need —"

Then seeing we neither carried begging bowls nor held out our hands for alms he stopped short. "What have you come for?"

"Our son works here," Nathan said. "His name is Murugan."

"Murugan? No one of that name works here"

"Doesn't work here! Are you sure?"

"Of course I am sure. There are only three servants employed, and Murugan is not one of them"

"There must be some mistake," Nathan muttered. He pulled out the slip of paper on which the address was written and handed it to the man, looking anxiously at him as he read — or perhaps pretended to read, for he handed back quickly saying

"Yes, yes, no doubt it is written there — but you must take my word, he is not here now"

"Why did we not write?" I thought miserably. "We should have written." But we had been so sure he would be here, we had relief on it, it had never struck us that he could leave without telling us

Just then we heard a car driving up, and from it stepped a figure wearing shirt and trousers, carrying a small black bag

"I am not sure," she said with a hint of pity in her eyes, "but I have heard that he works for the Collector. He lives on Chamundi Hill," she added. "Anyone will show you the house: it is big enough."

We were at the gate when she came after us. "You look faint—have you not eaten?"

"We were fed at the temple," I said, *not meeting those shrewd eyes*

"It is a long time since," she said. "You had better have a meal here before you go." She called to the servant and spoke to him rapidly, and he came, looking none too pleased, to lead us to where we had to go.

The servants' quarters lay behind the house and some distance away. They consisted of three godowns standing in a row, square rooms with brick walls and stone floors, each with a separate low doorway. At the first one the manservant, Das, stopped and beckoned us to enter. Inside it was half-dark, for there was only one window high up on the wall and a thick blue smoke was rising from a corner where a young woman was busy cooking.

"These people are to eat with us," Das said. "They are the parents of one Murugan who was before me."

The young woman rose and came to us cheerful and smiling, nursing a round, chubby baby. "You are more than welcome—you seem very tired."

Her friendliness, her smile, were warming like the sun on cold limbs, gentle as the rain on parched earth. I felt the stiffness that had collected in me departing, felt a new upsurge of hope. Nathan was visibly relaxed. "The rice is nearly cooked," the young woman was saying. "Perhaps you would like to wash before we eat—the tap is outside, my husband will show you."

Das was on his feet. "Ah yes, I had forgotten. Certainly a wash will do you good." He sounded more friendly.

We followed him out to the tap, which was about a furlong away. A cement floor had been built around the base of the tap, but the water which dripped constantly in

good to us and gives us rice and dhal. Today she sent extra for you."

So we ate with easy conscience, for I would not like to have taken from the store of a family who were for all their kindness only strangers to us, and who moreover had enough mouths of their own to feed.

As evening wore on the mother brought out a striped mat, for she had persuaded us to stay the night, on which to sleep. And sleep we did, the deep sleep of those who being tired have fed well and rested well.

The next morning early we departed, after thanking the doctor who was a woman, and Das and his wife who had cared so well for us, and she came to see us go with her curious-eyed children about her, sunny and smiling as when we had first seen her and to this day I see her as she was then, young and kind, with a warm smile ever ready on her lips.

"Come," Nathan said in a cracked voice. "Let us go in."

But we could not, although the door stood open, for sudden shyness had set a stranglehold upon us and the sense of intrusion was strong . . . and in the end we stood by the open doorway and called

A thin girl with untidy hair came out - the baby we had heard crying at her hip, a small boy clinging to her sari; stood staring at us with a slight frown

"Who is it? What do you want?"

No smile, no welcome 'Perhaps she thinks we are beggars,' I thought. 'No wonder since we look it,' and once more the humiliation of having nothing, not even a cooking pot, smote at me

"We are Murugan's parents," Nathan said gently. "You must be his wife"

The girl nodded, then recollecting herself she drew aside so that we could enter, came after us and stood biting her lip as if uncertain what to say

"These must be our grandchildren," I said, trying not to notice her attitude "I have long wanted to see them."

"No doubt" the girl said, her lips twisting a little. "No doubt you want to see your son, too. He is not here."

"Not here," Nathan repeated "I was told he was here! When is he coming back?"

"I wish I knew," she replied "I do not think he will ever come back"

"What do you mean? Are you not his wife? What makes you say he will never return?"

"He left me," she replied bitterly "He has been gone nearly two years"

We had come a long way to meet bad news and now it seemed there was neither going back nor going forward What we had saved had been taken from us, there was nothing more . . . nothing left to sell; neither strength left to

"Of course."

"One must live," she repeated, defiant, challenging, sensing reproach where none could be; for it is very true, one must live.

At midday, as she had said, she came back. She had told us to wait, yet now her attitude said very clearly: "You should not have taken me at my word, what I said was said in duty and for no other reason." In a sullen silence she began preparing the meal, lighting the fire, fetching the water, boiling the rice, the baby astride her hip as before and whimpering unheeded. She did not speak until we had eaten. Then she looked up.

"Where will you go? Can you return to your village?" "And when?" said her hostile questioning eyes. "I cannot keep you here indefinitely, the sooner you go the better."

"We must return to our village," Nathan agreed. "There is nothing for us here. We came only because of our son, you understand."

She nodded. "Yes, he has let us all down."

"Maybe there were reasons," I said. Whatever claim this woman had on him, still he was my son, I could not let her heap all the blame on him. Her face darkened, anger bloated her lips and lit fires behind her black brooding eyes.

"They were the usual ones: women and gambling," she said harshly.

We looked at each other, trembling on the brink of a quarrel, bitterness parting the threads of forbearance one by one, but while a few still held, suddenly, the outward semblance fell away. I saw only that she was a very young girl, frail beyond most, deserted by her husband and doing her best to feed herself and her children.

"I am sorry," I said jerkily. "I must have been out of my senses."

She nodded very slightly, accepting my explanation—the blaze dying out behind her face.

"It is better that we should go now," said N.

she had displayed had gone with the fear that we might have come to stay.

"Take care of yourselves," she called "Godspeed and may you get home safely" Her lips were smiling, she brought the boy to the door to wave to us

Though we had known them so short a while there was melancholy in the parting 'Maybe we shall never see them again,' I thought sadly, and I heard Nathan beside me heave a sigh Both of us absorbed in our thoughts, we did not understand the shouting we vaguely heard until one of the peons came running after us puffing and angry

"Are you deaf?" he bawled "I have told you three times that servants are not allowed to use this gate, yet you continue as if you had not heard!"

"We are not servants."

"Servants or not, it is all one! You must use the back gate Come on, if you are seen here I will lose my job."

We followed him Some distance from the main gate was a smaller one, and to this he pointed. "There! And remember to use it next time as well"

"There will not be a next time," said Nathan gently, "but we shall remember."

CHAPTER XXVII

ONE or two of the regulars in the town
"What, you back again! Trouble
in-law no doubt?"

"No, no trouble. All is well."

Some sniggered knowingly, others
"Ah well, things often turn out unexpected
luck will change soon."

A few were antagonistic and openly saw
their share of the food shrinking with
mouth.

"Outsiders should not be allowed,
'Are there not enough destitute in this
hole of India flocking in?'"

We looked at them resentfully. were
they? Soon we were looking at
"fal eye, wondering with each fresh
I there would be

Each night was a struggle, more fierce
aily engaged in it. I saw, night after night
it observed before the lame with their
way from them so that they fell and we
we feeble separated from their support
umbers were halved. Many a time
side unable to face the fray. If I had not
is distaste of the whole procedure would
starvation. As it was, more often than not
or two.

And when the crowd had dispersed, to
caverge, in the cool of the night and ca
n the quiet courtyards, or leaned our b
sitter in the round corridors, making our

of brown earth and green fields and the ripe rustling paddy, not, curiously, as they were, but as we had first known them. fresh, open and unspoilt, with their delicate scents and sounds untainted, with the skies clear above them and the birds finding sanctuary amid the grasses. And at the same time, keeping pace with these longings, our distaste for the city grew and grew and became a sweeping, pervading hatred.

"Better to starve where we were bred than live here," Nathan said passionately. "Whatever happens, whatever awaits us, we must return."

"But how? We have no money. My husband can till and sow and reap with skill, but here there is no land. I can weave and spin, or plait matting, but there is no money for spindle, cotton or fibre. For where shall a man turn who has no money? Where can he go? Wide, wide world, but as narrow as the coins in your hand. Like a tethered goat, so far and no farther. Only money can take the rope stretch, only money."

"Then one day I thought I would set myself up as a reader of letters such as there are in most villages, and surely also in cities?"

"Whoever heard of a woman reader," said Nathan. "No one will come to you."

"If I ask little, and less than the others, custom there will surely be," said I. "In any case one must try. Even a few annas would help."

"Do you think you could?" Nathan was half-despondent, half-eager, and somehow the eagerness alone communicated itself to me.

"Yes, I am sure. If I write letters as well as read them, I shall earn even more."

"How can you write without paper or ink?"

"Who asks must provide," I said confidently. "Leave it to me."

We looked at each other and none stirred, albeit cautiously, making us

"He guided us to the doctor's house," I explained, "where we first came."

There was a pause. Nathan began sharing out the rice and dhal, carefully tearing the plantain leaf he carried into three pieces on which to put each portion. I had with the day's earnings bought as usual one rice cake which I now broke to hand round. The boy stared at it: "You must have money! Otherwise how could you buy rice cakes?"

I sighed. "I earn two annas a day by writing letters—sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less. I buy food with it."

"Which is not unreasonable," Nathan said impatiently, "seeing how one portion has sometimes to be stretched to three!"

At last Puli seemed satisfied. He began to eat, and ever more I saw that he had no fingers, only stumps. He himself did not appear to find any difficulty in managing with them except that once or twice he had to use both hands, and there was a certain awkwardness in his handling of the food. Despite myself I could not keep my eyes off his hands; the harder I tried to keep my gaze fixed elsewhere, the more it fastened itself to those stumps. Puli, seemingly unaware, continued eating stolidly. 'He is used to it,' I thought 'He knows and accepts the shameful probing curiosities of human beings.'

When we had eaten, and fed the leaves to the goats, and washed, Puli to my surprise lay down beside us.

"You had better go home," I said, nudging him. "What will your poor mother think if you stay here all night?"

"I have no mother, poor or otherwise," he said. "There is no one to worry about me and none to worry me either, which is a good thing," and turning on his side he fell instantly asleep.

I might have felt apprehensive for him, but that I knew him to be eminently capable of looking after himself; or sorry, save that he so patently did not desire it; but I could not help feeling a vague responsibility which certainly I knew I was in no position to fulfil.

"He is probably better fitted to fend for himself than we are——" Nathan began, but although he was echoing my words, he was not really listening. "How

much money do you want?"

"You earn two annas," he asked, "after working all day?" I nodded: "Sometimes three or four."

"Between two and four then," he amended impatiently. "Have you no wish to earn more?"

I stared at him.

"If only I could," I said, half breathless. "Is there any way?"

"There is a stone quarry," he said, "not far from here. Stone-breakers earn good wages."

"And who will employ us," said Nathan sadly, "at our age? Such heavy work would in any event be beyond us."

"Age doesn't matter," the boy said impatiently. "As for who will employ you, there is no such thing. Anyone can go to work and be paid by the results—so much for each day's work."

"Are we not beyond such labour?"

"Indeed no! All kinds of work in the quarry, men, women and children. I would work too," he added, "but I cannot hold a hammer or stone firmly enough. One can earn a good deal if one works quickly."

"Lead on," Nathan said. "We are in your hands."

We heard the noise of the stone-breakers long before we reached the quarry, a clink-clank of stone on stone with intermittent dull explosions. As we drew near, the din grew louder; we had to shout to make ourselves heard.

The quarry was on a hillside, not the calm and pleasant Chamundi Hill, but another, lesser hill, bare and rocky, with here and there a few trees. On one side of the hill the land

"It is not a simple way of earning," I said, "and it is more difficult than it looks." And Nathan grumbled, "If we had a hammer, at least we should not have so much *fatigue*." Yet there were many like us without hammers and using only stones, who were making very good progress. Once or twice I stopped to watch, admiring and envious, while the stones broke obediently to the right size under their skillful blows and the knobbly heaps before them grew. Suddenly once were we disturbed by blasting near us. Engrossed in our work, neither of us had observed the red flag, nor with the hammering constantly beating upon our eardrums, did we hear the whistle go; but Puli, more alert than either of us, hustled us to safety, and as we ran we felt the ground shake beneath us.

"You must learn to be careful," Puli said severely, while rain and earth still rained down on us like hail-stones. "Did you not hear the whistle, or the people who shouted to stop? This blasting is a nuisance," he went on. "You will find your stones are scattered; but you will get used to it." The stones were indeed scattered, and mixed inextricably with those of other workers. but when we had collected what we reckoned to be our pile no one raised any objections. Sometimes one loses, sometimes one gains," a man said philosophically. "It evens itself out."

I was thankful there was this spirit of amity: we were

... of stones
... eyes, very
...ore us was not very far. All about us people were stopping work. As the light faded so the clink-clank died, in the gathering darkness only a few faint sounds of hammering told of a solitary stone-breaker continuing his labours. I turned to the boy beside us. "Well, what now? Who says us?"

"We must get a sack first," he replied. "Your husband had better wait here while we are gone. Come, I will show you the overseer's hut."

I thanked him, feeling surprised that Puli had not known, who was so competent in his way. Then I reminded myself that despite his airs he was only a child.

Turn I entered. A man was sitting on the floor leaning on a small raised wooden board resting on bricks before him.

"How many?" He did not raise his eyes

"One only."

He entered something in a book and reached for some coins, then he looked up. "Where is your sack?"

"I have not got one. I have just come for it," I stammered.

"Why did you not ask for it in the first place?" he said dryly. "Are you trying to get money for nothing?"

He put the coins back on the pile, took a basket from the stack behind him

"Here you are. No sacks left. And hurry up, else you will not be paid tonight."

I took it and ran back to Nathan. Breathless with haste I filled the basket and I was back while the line of waiters stretched before the hut.

"Two sacks, one rupee. Three sacks, one-eight." The seer's voice kept calling, monotonous, slightly weary. Finally I placed my basket in front of him.

"One sack, eight annas," he called; then impatiently, changing his rhythm, "Not there! Behind, with the others!"

I put the basket alongside the others. Now at last I was paid. He took out the money, two coins, each a four-anna piece, dropped them in my palm.

Nathan was waiting, eager and impatient. "How much?" "Eight annas."

We looked at each other, smiling, jubilant. "We shall be home," Nathan said softly. "Think of it!"

It seemed natural that we should wait for Puli, and sure enough he joined us a few minutes later. The boy had attached himself to us of his own accord and now both of us took it for granted he would remain.

CHAPTER XXVIII

counting annas, as the days went by, we began to count rupees. Four rupees, five, six. Even Puli began to show excitement. There was the time when we worked well—or the stones were so kind—that we earned a pie in a single day. I handed the coin as usual to Puli, thrust it into the ragged pouch which covered his hand. Where he transferred the money we gave him from, I do not know. It was his own business and he never said: certainly not one pie was ever lost. We walked back that day in the coppery twilight already edged with black, like ashes around dying embers. A thin drizzle was falling, so fine it might have been dew, the ground beneath our feet felt like the earth in the early morning and no longer wet. In fancy I was already home.

The single, twisting road that led from the quarry soon branched into several streets, the main one leading to the bazaar, and it was this that I took.

"I will go on to the temple," said Nathan. "I am a little tired—besides it does not take two to buy rice cakes." "Maybe a little more than rice cakes this time," I said seriously, winking at the boy. "You go on, we will give you a surprise."

I went to the small shop as I did each morning, Puli in my step beside me, and the vendor hailed me as an old customer. He was a good man, for all that I bought so little from him: he sought out the largest rice cakes for the same money, and sometimes a lump of ghee to go with them as well.

"Wait a bit," I said, as he began to wrap the rice cake in a plantain leaf. "There may be a little more today."

"Come into money, have you?" he cried, chuckling and tapping his thigh with a loud report. "Well, you have found the right man. I have a selection such as few have."

and, mark you, cheaper than anybody else ! What will I have ? Potato fritters, crisped in butter and melting in oil or these fried pancakes I have myself stuffed with onion and meat . . . Something sweet for the boy ? . . . Sugar-whirls, or the exquisite curly-curlys ? ”

What shall it be, what shall it be ? I inspected all the delicacies, which I had never dared to do before, and I found it next to impossible to decide between them. Puli, hopping up and down beside me, was likewise veering from one dainty to another. “ The pilau there, such a lovely smell and it has roasted nuts in it — or no, I think the fritters will last longer . . . ”

In the end we bought the fried pancakes, one each, paying six annas for the three, and four annas for two rice cakes.

“ Well, if we are extravagant it is only once,” I said, seeking to console my uneasy mind. “ Ten annas is only a little over what we usually spend. The change will do good ”

But the recklessness did not end there. As we walked on we passed a hawker, and he had a sensitive nose and saw that we had a little money and little control to go with it, and he came after us pulling out and exhibiting his wares, and at last he took out a small wooden cart on wheels, which he attached a string and pulled it along behind him as he came following us.

“ A dum-dum cart,” cried Puli, and he echoed the man, “ We need not buy, let us only stop and watch ” and he tugged at my sarī. So we stopped to look at the toy and indeed it was a pretty thing, lovingly made, exactly like a real cart, the wood skilfully carved with painted spokes to the wheels and a yoke which rested on the necks of the painted oxen.

“ Pull it and hear the drum beat,” said the wily Puli, holding out the string to Puli, and how could he resist it, who was only a child, when I myself was enchanted. So he jerked the string and as the cart came towards him the legs of the oxen moved and the carter’s

and fell and the drum-sticks he held in them came upon the tiny drum in front of him -- a real drum, ingeniously made with cords up the sides and skin stretched tautly over the top. Dum-dum-dum-dum went the drum, the quicker you pulled the faster it beat.

"Two annas only -- you will never be able to buy cheaper, cost me all of that to make . . . There is no profit to me in it, I only sell because I must. I have not sold one all day."

I sneaked a glance at Puli and he was looking at me with eyes like lamps. He still held the string between the stumps of his fingers, and kept yanking at it as if the humming was sweet to his ears.

"Why do you not pay for it with your own money if you want it?" I said uneasily. "I see you begging every day . . . You know I have spent more than I ought already."

"Two annas more won't matter," he wheedled. "I promise I will never ask you for anything. . ."

"But you have money of your own," I repeated. "I have seen it myself."

"I have spent it all," he said pitifully. "People gave at first but now they are used to me . . . It is a hard world."

Again I thought, 'He is a child after all, still tender, still eager. Whatever he may say or do he has lived only a short time, not easily.' And even as I nodded he began fumbling at his pouch, unable in his haste to undo it, until at last I had to do it for him, taking from it the coins I needed, still warm from his body, and handing them to the hawker.

Then extravagance grew frenzied, encouraged by this ease, and I could not stop myself from taking out two more annas to buy another cart. 'For my little grandchild,' I thought, 'who has had so much to bear from his father,' and I pictured his white transparent cheeks flushing with excitement while Ira hovered nearby with her smile like a flower and the . . . smile that graced it. . .

shivering, but no longer violently. I broke up the two cakes and we ate in silence, depressed by the ceaseless rain. 'Nathan has eaten his share,' I thought. 'He at be better; it is the cold which makes him shiver' Nevertheless I said to him anxiously, "Stay behind and it— it is not good for you to go out in this rain. Tomorrow will be enough."

"Tomorrow and tomorrow it will rain," he replied. "It is the monsoon. I cannot sit here idling while the ship past and we are still far from home."

We went, the three of us, to the quarry, joining the straggled groups of workers toiling along the winding, muddy road. Those who were richer bought and used palm-leaf hooded cloaks which felt stuffily from head to thigh, making them look like walking beetles, but these protectors were expensive, twelve annas apiece, and most of the workers did without.

Rain had softened the road, liquid mud came squelching up between my toes as I walked. Ahead and behind were scores of footprints, many of them like small holes where water had seeped in. The cart-tracks were full of water too, long lines criss-crossing with mud flung up on either side of the trenches. Three or four empty bullock-carts passed us on the way to collect the broken stones, the bullocks drawing them struggling to get through the mass, their hides slippery with sweat and rain. The wheels sank deep in the mud as they turned, mud splattered continuously from the creaking wheels.

"The worst season of the year," a voice was grumbling. "Next year whatever happens I shall not work."

"Pah, you say that every year."

"No, really, this time I mean it, even if it means eating."

Plans, everyone had plans. They were all built on money. Save enough to keep dry, save enough to cast off their chains, save enough to go away.

The clink of stones came to us sodden with the instinct, unmistakable. A few brave souls had risen,

The hawker took the money from me and trudged quickly — no doubt fearing that I would come to senses. We continued on our way, Puli dragging on behind him, I carrying the other together with the cakes, the pancakes and the two-anna piece which all that was left of the day's earnings; while I thought again and again of what I would say to my husband. Now we were within the precincts of the temple. I caught sight of Nathan and ran towards him, bid the boy pick up the cart with its infernal drum: but he was bewitched, the cart must come dum-dumming behind.

"I don't know what came over me," I blurted, pent up. "I shall work very hard tomorrow to make up. You will see."

Nathan looked at me, his eyes were dull. "He is over-perated," I thought. "No wonder!"

"We have a surprise for you," I said with false cheerfulness. "Look, pancakes!"

Nathan gave them a glance, then rose hurriedly on his feet. I saw him stagger to one side, away from the stone corridors. When the spasm of sickness was over, he came back to lean against a pillar. He was shivering.

"It was the food," he gasped. "It turned my stomach."

"You have worked too hard," I said. "It does not do to strain oneself."

"The fever has been coming all day," he said. "It started this morning."

I felt his body and it was burning hot, the skin was dry and stretched. He had obviously been ill for several hours. "Why did you have to do it?" I wanted to know. "Why?" But I only said, "Lie and rest. You will be better." And I took his head in my lap and set my hands to massaging the pain from his limbs.

The rain which had been a fine drizzle had become by morning a heavy downpour. The air, as always at the beginning of the monsoon, lay like a blanket over the earth, damp and suffocating, but when it blew the wind came through the rain wet and chill. Nathan

Disjointed thoughts kept clattering through my brain or was the clatter only the rain? I stumbled down the slopes, treacherous with mud and stones, sighing with relief as I reached the road.

Half way along it, I saw a small knot of people gathered. 'Nothing can make me stop,' I thought, hurrying along. In one of the group called, "Ai! See to your man, he has fallen."

I stopped and my senses poised themselves on the brink of insensibility, ready to swoop away at the merest nod of a hand. I shook off the blackness and went to him through the gathered people, who parted to let me through, and closed their ranks as I knelt beside him.

He was lying by the side of the road where someone had killed him—not in the gutter but away from the road, void of the mud-churning cart-wheels. His body had made a path through the wet mud, in it he lay jerking and twitching; to him the swollen gutter ran like a stream, noisily; and it I could hear his hoarse breathing. I touched him, his body was as *chill* as the wind. The pitiless rain splashing down uncaring. I had no shield for him. At last I unwound part of my sari, meaning to tear it, but the material would not tear. Where my hands were it tore, limp and perished. In despair I wound the rags round him again. Nobody gave anything, nobody had anything to give, the men in loin-cloths, the women in tattered and sodden like mine. 'It makes no difference,' I said to myself, and found the words being murmured by others.

One man took him by the armpits, another his feet. I was walking behind, with me other women, whispering words of comfort that the rain washed away as soon as they were uttered. Sometimes there was a silence while I waited for my answer, waited while I groped for

3.
"Has he been ill long?"
"Yes; some time."

"Have you no sons to help?"

"Yes — no — not here."

I licked my wet lips There was a taste
and of the fresh sweetness of rainwater. I
I had been crying.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE memories of that night are hard and bright within me like a diamond, and the fires that flash from it have strange powers. Some are blue and wrap me gently in their glow; or green and soothing like oxen eyes in the night; but there are others, yellow and red, that sear me with their intensity. When this happens I call to the mists and they come, like clouds that cover the sun. But the fires themselves are always there, they will never be extinguished till my life itself is done.

What do I remember? Every word, every detail. I remember walking along the wet deserted street by the wall of the temple; I remember looking up for the flare that had just burnt on the top of the temple, and it was quenched; and the black demons of fear came shrieking at my ear and I would not be silenced, for all that I repeated like a madwoman, 'Fire cannot burn in water.' I saw the faces of men who were not there and of children from whom the life had been filched, and yet it was a black night, blacker than black since the stars were hidden.

They laid my husband on the paved floor and I sank down beside him. Somebody brought a light, a hurricane-lamp that burned steady in the stormy wind; somebody brought water. His body was caked in mud, wet and dirty. They wiped him clean, took his head in my lap. The knot of people who had come so far with me melted away into the darkness, in ones and twos, when they saw how it was. Nathan's head kept twitching from side to side, he called to his four sons and muttered words that I did not understand. The rays from the lantern fell on his wasted face, on the yellowed skin, on the lips split with fever, on his teeth which were like a child's. Sometimes his breath came between his chattering teeth in gusts, rising above the

CHAPTER XXX

THE days went by, Nathan no longer beside me; no more. Ashes and dust, scattered to the winds, moistened by the rain, unrecognisable. I picked up the fragments of my life and put them together, all but the missing piece; and out of my affliction I called to Puli. I do not know what words I used, when I think of what I may have said. I shiver. Rich promise to lure a child, before I knew it could be kept. Priceless treasure of health, not mine to give. And he, compassionate creature, who drew from me the arrows of sorrow one by one, listened, and when I came to I was not alone.

It was good to be home at last, at last. The cart jolted to a standstill. I looked about me at the land and it was as if it were to my starving spirit. I felt the earth beneath my feet wept for happiness. The time of in-between, already in memory, coiled away like a snake within its hole.

From the unfinished, scaffolded building a figure emerged, came running. Selvam, my son.

"Thank God," he said. "Are you all right?" and he came to me. My daughter joined us, her haste making her breathless. Puli alone, not of the family, standing a little apart awkwardly, clutching in his arms the dumdum cart, looked at me.

"My son," I said. "We adopted him, your father and

"You look tired and hungry," Ira said, taking his arm. "Come with me and rest, I will prepare the rice."

They walked on ahead.

"Do not worry," Selvam said. "We shall manage."

What had to be said.

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"After a few moments he rose to his feet, uncertain still which of the two had conquered

"The mother was conscious of the agony that was raging in the heart of her son, the priest. She lamented, 'Why, Oh Lord, was Paul forbidden to love a woman?'

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